

**Mastergradsoppgavens tittel:**

**WHAT WE SEE,  
AS CONTRASTED WITH,  
WHAT WE OUGHT TO SEE.**

**Based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception.**

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## PREFACE

I take interest in us persons and in our everyday lived lives taking place here in our daily environments. I believe that we persons are always situated through our bodies in a physical context, - although our thoughts may be about situations and places very different and distant from that of our current bodily fixed situationality. I believe that in our thoughts we can move along the time line of past, present, and future while our living bodies always at any given time link us to a particular situationality in the physical world.

My essay, having the title of *what we see, as contrasted with, what we ought to see*, is based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) philosophical position. Merleau-Ponty is a representative of phenomenology. The read line running through my essay is the role of senses as our initial contact with the world, and therefore also the role of the body as a continual attachment to the world in which we live. Thus, Merleau-Ponty reopens the problem of a sense experience after Descartes.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception includes the sphere of the visual arts as an intertwined aspect of his philosophical position. I will follow in this tradition. Merleau-Ponty discusses the Modern visual arts which were prevailing during his time. I will bring along the Contemporary site-specific and situational artwork since the late 1990s.

My essay is divided into three parts. The Part 1, - Casting the Case -, puts forward the underlying big question of this essay, namely what does the situationality, in terms of our bodily existence and our direct bodily contact with the world, have to do with that of having access to something that leads to knowledge about us persons and the exterior world? This question will be further discussed with the help of the guiding question of *what do we see*.

The Part 2, - Contrasting the Case -, takes a step back to the history. In this Part 2 Merleau-Ponty's view is further contrasted with the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition.

The Part 3, - Compromising the Case -, builds a bridge between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological position put forward in 1945 and the current day Contemporary site-specific and situational artworks since late 1990s. In the Part 3 my solution for Merleau-Ponty's wish to unify the spheres of extreme subjectivism and the extreme

objectivism discussed in Part 2 is put forward in the light of the Contemporary site-specific and situational artworks.

## **PART 1 – CASTING THE CASE**

# PART 1 – CASTING THE CASE

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

### 1.1 Introducing my interest and the underlying question

I take interest in us persons and in our everyday lived lives taking place here in our daily environments. I am interested in situations and in situationality. I believe that we persons are always situated through our bodies in a physical context, - although our thoughts may be about situations and places very different and distant from that of our current bodily fixed situationality. In our thoughts we can move along the time line of past, present, and future while our living bodies always at any given time link us to a particular situationality in the physical world. With the other words, through our thought process, metaphorically, we are able to leave our bodies behind and situate ourselves in environments beyond the temporary reach of our physiological existence. In all of these activities the physical world exist as a context of these actions. I take it given that the physical world is here, independent of us persons. My common sense thinking reflects my practical experience and tells me that the worlds stays, while the generations pass. I take notice that someone gives birth to a new life, while someone else dies. I take this to be practical knowledge about our ordinary daily lives. I am curious about how we persons are situated here in the world, in these settings, in this practical sphere of situationality. I am curious about how do we have knowledge of these situations in which we are directly attached by our physical existence. This interest of mine has its roots, in addition to philosophy, in my theoretical and practical background of visual arts and architecture. - Now, if you prefer to think along the lines of analytical approach to philosophy, the underlying very big question of this essay is that *what does the situationality, in terms of our bodily existence and our direct bodily contact with the world, have to do with that of having access to something that leads to knowledge about us persons and the exterior world?*

Analytically, the above question is understood as an epistemological question dealing with the theory of knowledge. Further, along the analytical approach, in this

essay, I intend to give light and reflect over the above large epistemological question with the help of a guiding question of *what do we see?* - Notice that as with the world, I do not doubt if the world exists or not, I take it given that it exists. Also, I believe that we can have knowledge of us persons and the things around us. I do not question if we can have knowledge or not. Nor do I question the importance of the knowledge. After this has been said, I assume that the reader has solid reasons to question my point of spending time with the above epistemological question, which is not new, by any means, in the Western philosophical tradition. The above question has been asked and answered, based on reason, a time after a time, by the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism ever since the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition. - Further more, by the opinions of many, the above question has been answered more than sufficiently enough along the lines of these traditional theories based on rationality.

### **1.2 Reasons for asking the underlying question**

Now, let me try to give you a short overview which sets forth my motivation for attempting to establish something fresh concerning the above underlying big question. First of all, notice that, to start with, I just simply describe, by using a very basic language, a situation which interests me. Then, I translate, - or with the other words -, I explain and compress my puzzlement about our practical and direct involvement in the world into a question using the analytical terminology. It is very important that the reader will keep these two paralleling approaches of describing and analyzing/explaining in his or her mind. I will get back to this parallelism in more detail in this essay, a time after a time. For the time being, just take notice of this paralleling approach.

Secondly, it is important to say a few words about the formulation of the underlying big question expressed in the terms of the analytical approach. Notice how the openness and the formulation of the question points towards a transitory position. The openness of the question is achieved by not including the ambitious aim of certainty. Traditionally the quality of certainty has been holding the most valuable and priced post, as a standard of measure, in the Western epistemological thought. In my formulation of the underlying big question, I have all together left out that of demanding a defined and definite standard of measure for knowledge about us persons and the exterior world. I do not ask what can we have true knowledge of, and



how can we gain this true knowledge, as it is asked in the traditional epistemological sense. The element of transitoriness is expressed by my emphasis of asking how to *search access* to knowledge. The term access implies that the search for knowledge is taking place through something. And this something in this essay is to be understood as a transitory position placed in us persons, and more exactly, in our direct bodily contact with the world. Thus, the question of how to search access to an initial moment which will light up something fresh to us and eventually provide us with some new knowledge about us and the world, is directing me to study our bodily awareness as experienced in the situations we daily are part of. I believe that it is important to establish that the uncertain, undefined, unclear, strange, and indeterminate initial moment is as something certain in the way that this initial moment is the true start for that of searching access to knowledge. Further, this transitoriness also implies that the initial situation is not static but dynamic. This initial situation is to be taken developed through different stages from its initial level to the levels of something more defined and clear. This refers to the process of learning. Thus, I take interest in how could our elementary and direct bodily contact with the world give raise to an event which is transformed through learning into something which opens up a new dimension of knowledge to us.

Thirdly, as it is implied, throughout the times in the Western analytical philosophical tradition, the natural sciences have exercised authority and domination over the practical sphere, for clear and powerful reasons. A time after a time, new life saving and life advancing scientific discoveries within neurosciences, physics and chemistry, and so on, are published around the world. In the eyes of the traditional analytical philosophy, the value of objective and calculating rational thought based on reason and law-like causal relations is more reliable and certain over the more uncertain, more unreliable and more dubitable, contingent knowledge received through our bodily awareness, with the other words, through our senses.

The point, that I want to make, is that I believe that the basic knowledge includes more than just certain and scientific knowledge alone. A certain and absolute knowledge is traditionally based on reason and scientific laws and formulas, and therefore I take the certain and absolute knowledge to belong to the theoretical sphere. And this again leads back to the issue of that of being a person, and what is the essence of being a person. I take that the scientific and theoretical standpoint is not enough alone to describe what it is to be a person. The scientific and theoretical

sphere has ignored and forgotten the value and potentiality, and the situationality of our everyday life, and that we learn new things throughout our life, and that we need to constantly adjust the standpoints we take and the perspectives which we carry, therefore also recomposing our understanding of ourselves and the world which we are part of. We are not born as fully developed and functioning creatures, and by the time we leave this world, we still have not reached the state of perfect development and the level of equally perfect functioning.

The overall aim of this essay is to sketch another, more including approach towards that of searching and gaining knowledge, than it has traditionally been done, through theorizing along the lines of analytical philosophy, based on the standard of certainty. But don't get me wrong, - I want to emphasize that by no means am I after to deny the value of certain, scientific knowledge -, all I am saying is that I believe that there is more to knowledge and to that of grasping us persons and our lives, than what the scientific approach alone can provide. Analytical approach alone does not lead to the entire answer how it is to be, and what is essential to that of being a person. There is nothing wrong in the scientific, epistemological approach as long as it stays with its own sphere of objective knowledge, in the context of the scientific knowledge and experiments. But the traditional epistemological approach is not giving and revealing the full story of the human life. If we want to reveal somewhat more complete story of the human life and knowledge, we need to take a step back, and revise the old epistemological question. Analytically understood, now I have given a short overview consisting of my reasons for wishing to modify the traditional epistemological question aiming to establish knowledge which has its standard of measure in nothing less than certainty. I hope to return on the agenda that of being bodily involved in the world, with the other words, the scope of the difficult practical sphere with no absolute rules and laws.

### **1.3 The method of describing**

Now, remember that the analytical method will not be the sole method applied in this essay. As I already mentioned, parallel to the analytical method I will run the method of *describing*, which is somewhat "anti-analytical". - I believe that describing is the method that is suitable to the practical sphere. My approach will be to study this bodily awareness by describing our everyday basic life. I will be discussing such elementary situations such as seeing an apple, a glass, a boat, a CD Disk, a chair, a

table, a landscape in a misty weather and another landscape during a clear day, a blue patch against a grey background, a line drawing of a black square on a piece of white paper, and so on. The approach of describing is very tricky, since it does not apply the analytical method. The method of describing accepts the seen as it is, without trying to see or understand more than the situation gives rise to. Accepting this approach will be probably very difficult for the analytical reader. But keep in mind, that accepting this approach based on describing, is the key to understand my essay. Just hold onto this thought for now, and don't worry about being uncertain how to grasp the method of describing. The method of describing will be clear to the reader by the time the reader have finished up reading this essay. Throughout this essay, I will provide a key after a key, needed for grasping the method and the significance of describing. This again will add a perspective after a perspective, and therefore reveal a depth after a depth on the ongoing discussion.

#### **1.4 The issue of perspectivism**

Now, we have added that of perspectivism into the discussion. That of perspectivism adds another important parallel to the ongoing discussion in this essay. Parallel to the analysis of the traditional epistemological question I will have a perspectivist view dealing with the question of knowledge. Perspectivism will be forming an important part of this essay. As a starting point, for now, I will accept that the perspective, which I carry, is colored and shaded by my direct contact with the world, and thereby by my situationality in the world. Further, my perspective is shaped by my practical and theoretical background, strongly influenced by the material I have been reading. - In analytical way of understanding this perspectivism, is as to say that my, or any person's viewpoint is characterized as seeing through one's personal filter, in the Kantian sense. But I will not aim for objective and universal guiding principles along the lines of Kant. I will not attempt to take a "view from nowhere"<sup>1</sup>, or the "God's eye view"<sup>2</sup> in the extreme objective<sup>3</sup> way attempting to eliminate one's personal involvement with the world. I am quite convinced that by now the reader has formed an idea that my standpoint is not that of

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<sup>1</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty A Guide for the Perplexed*, reference to Tomas Nagel and his essay *A view from nowhere*, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty A Guide for the Perplexed*, reference to Descartes and his Six Meditations, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xxii.

the traditional standpoint aiming for extreme objectivity. Equally importantly, I want to emphasize that neither will I take the opposite extreme view point, namely, that of extreme subjectivism<sup>4</sup>. I take that the extreme subjectivism collapses into solipsism saying that only the self can be known to exist<sup>5</sup>. The extreme subjectivism grounds everything on the private personal experience, and therefore loses contact and the joint basis for interaction with the world, including that of the other human beings, - although, ironically, its object of its study was initially the objective world. Along with similar lines, the supporter of the extreme objectivism seems to forget that initially it is the objectivist himself or herself as a scientist who theorizes and is involved in experiments. The theorizing takes place through a person carrying a status of a scientist. I assume the reader is now wondering what is the position and view which I intend to take.

### **1.5 The spheres of objectivism and subjectivism**

In the coming sentences I will be pointing towards the deeper core of this essay, and therefore also towards the position which I intend to establish. My viewpoint will be initially based on recognizing that we persons are subjects who are in direct contact with the world. But since the world exists independently of us subjects, the world is also the object which we are looking at. This gives birth to the acknowledgement of the objective sphere in addition to the subjective sphere. This is, in a nutshell, my starting position for that of attempting to describe our everyday life with the help of the question *of what do we see*. - Analytically understood, this points towards reopening the question of sense experience.

Thus, the relation between the objective sphere and the subjective sphere is in the very core of the discussion in this essay. The point I wish to make in this essay is that uncertainty and indeterminate, and vagueness, - as the initial stages of grasping something and learning, - are to be seen carrying importance. The sphere of certain knowledge, aimed to be reached both by the traditional theories of empiricism (in its outmost seen as extreme subjectivism) and intellectualism empiricism (in its outmost seen as extreme objectivism), is just one aspect of knowledge we are able to have, but it does not cover the entire aspect/scale of that of being a person. In the contrary, I do not wish to unmythify the irrational and non-law like aspects of that of being a person

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<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xxii.

<sup>5</sup> *The New Lexicon, Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 944.

and living an ordinary life. I wish to accept these aspects of that of being a person, and to recognize the essence and importance of them.

To sum up until now, by this point it has been sketch that it is of essence to have a more including and open approach to knowledge. Knowledge is not be defined by the standard of certainty alone. It is important to look into the often ignored practical sphere as a source of knowledge. It is us persons who have this transitory position as a key position for that of having access to the uncountable changes of discovering different initial moments towards knowledge. If we understand our position in the world, we can understand how to gain access to knowledge. We cannot understand how to have access to knowledge, without understanding our own position. I take that in the first place we are initially in contact with the world through our sense experience, so we have to trust to this position some what since we cannot leave it behind, nor can we ignore or deny it. Nor does it help to doubt it. I simply accept this position and start my work from this bodily grounded earthly position. I am just curious how to grasp the value of it and how to describe this value which I believe is found in that of intertwining the subjective sphere and the objective sphere. - Now the question has become to how to set light on the importance of the practical sphere? Or is this just another ambitious goal to be reached, possibly collapsing into its own impossibility? Now we need the perspective shift that will allow us to look at the world at fresh.

### **1.6 Seeing our ordinary, practical life thought the Contemporary visual arts**

And this takes me back to the initial question dealing with that of searching access to knowledge, and the transitory position in us persons. We need to take a new look of our daily lives, in hope to discover something that has been traditionally overseen, to what we have been “blind” to until now. In order to be able to relook at ourselves and our involvement in our daily environments at new, it is necessary with a slight shift of positions. We need to get hold on to a new and fresh perspective, without loosing contact with our subjective sphere, and without stepping too far to the side into the objective sphere. In the core of this new perspective is the subject-object relation and that of unifying the far end objectivism and the far end subjectivism. This needed shift of a perspective, while still being in oneself, while also being able to look at the situation at new, is provided by that of involving the sphere of the Contemporary visual arts into discussion.

And parallel to the sphere of the Contemporary visual arts, now it is at its place to bring along the guiding question of *what do we see*. Remember, this question was introduced in the very beginning of this essay, in the second paragraph. The purpose of bringing along this question is to ask questions about what we see and eventually with the help of these questions to relearn to look at our everyday life at new. With the other words, we need a shift of a perspective concerning our customized blindness towards all of this so familiar around us. This shift of positions, while accepting our subjective grip in the situationality, and simultaneously adding the objective “stepping-on-the-side-gaze”, for further development and reflection over the experienced, is provided by looking at these everyday situations in the context of the visual arts. By visual arts, I do not mean visual arts generally. In the contrary, I find that the needed perspective shift is realized in the context of certain Contemporary site-specific and situational visual art projects since the late 1990s. More exactly, in these particular examples, which I will introduce more in detail towards the end of this essay, more exactly in the Part 3, one can literally walk into a piece of art. An atmosphere and environment is created and constructed where even the air between is an important part of the artwork. In many cases the entire gallery is transformed into one single large-scale piece of artwork, expanding from room to room, from floor to floor. Therefore, in that instant when one enters the gallery, one becomes a part of the art setting. In one way this is to be understood that one leaves one’s everyday life behind, while being served and involved in a new setting of an everyday life in the context of the gallery. And not only this, but the artwork is set in a position for use. One is not a passive element of the setting of an artwork, but rather, one has an active role in this often puzzling, while still familiar, setting. These works of arts involve us in different activities. One could be involved in cooking, in that of using chairs and tables of accurate sizes in a gallery situation. The traditional distance between that of being a subject looking at an object is not there in the traditional sense. The subject-object relation is intertwined. In this setting, the subject himself has become an object of this particular Contemporary artwork. Both our direct bodily attachment in the situation, as well as our ability to reflect over the experienced situation, are challenged. Thus the practical and theoretical spheres are activated. This is to be understood like a total environment giving a new perspective to our everyday life.

Through this we can learn to look at the world at new. And thereby also discover the things how they really are as seen by the pre-reflective perception.<sup>6</sup> These objects revealed are shaped by their context and eventually made sense in our consciousness through the process of learning.

Now I have sketched for the reader the large frame for this essay. The details are to be discovered along the way, forming a more coherent and sound perspectivist holism of my view. This is as if I have cast the case, as the title of this part 1 refers to. The set is given, the actors of empiricism, intellectualism, and phenomenism are introduced, each having their distinguished role. The challenge remains to see if these actors, who have quite different vocabulary and language almost if they live in different worlds, are to be able to communicate with each other. In the end, naturally, it is left for the reader to ponder over, and to decide on if this view is worth of taking into consideration or not. My viewpoint is just one view point of many different possible paths found among a wide range of philosophical courses. For now I have chosen to follow the phenomenological course, consisting of describing the practical life. Thus, my philosophical viewpoint is not mine to start with. My philosophical viewpoint has its roots deeply grounded in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The difference is that I am putting forward my interpretation of the puzzle faced by Merleau-Ponty, in the light of his phenomenology, as well as I am attempting to see the puzzle of intertwining the subjective and objective spheres taken closer to being solved in the present day context of the Contemporary visual arts. The part concerning the context of the Contemporary visual arts is my contribution to the discussion put forward by Merleau-Ponty. Now it is time to say a few words about my choice of literature and equally importantly, how to read this literature, and therefore also, how to read my essay.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 20 and 135.

## Chapter 2 - The underlying literature and how to read my essay

### 2.1 The underlying literature

Now it is the time to introduce the literature on which my view is relaying. I have strongly anchored, almost as if I have one-sidedly adhered my position in the writings of a French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). His philosophical position is the source behind the way I see us persons and the world, the questions which I ask, and bringing in the discipline of the visual arts. Thus, take it that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical position is strongly reflected in the above introductory section of my essay, through my interpretation of his position.

My understanding of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological position is based on three sources. Two of these sources are direct sources written by Merleau-Ponty himself. The most comprehensive of these sources is his book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in 1945. The second book, *The World of Perception*, published in 1948<sup>7</sup>, is more compact, but by no means of a lesser value for me. I take this second book to give a compressed version of Merleau-Ponty's book, *Phenomenology of Perception*. This second book, *The World of Perception*, follows a form of seven lectures discussing the main issues of his phenomenological view of perception. As a matter of fact, initially, these seven lectures were delivered on French radio by Merleau-Ponty in its publishing year. The third source is an indirect source written by Eric Matthews as a guide for understanding Merleau-Ponty. I do appreciate the title of this book, namely, *Merleau-Ponty, A Guide for the Perplexed*. This is a very recent book, first published in 2006.

First of all, my understanding of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological position is initially based on an introductory section of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>8</sup>. Merleau-Ponty's introductory section gives an overview how the

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<sup>7</sup> By Routledge, first translated into English in 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty's book, *Phenomenology of Perception* is considered probably as his most influential work. It was written during his early years. This major work was published during this same time period. Initially it was first published only in French in 1945, the English version did not come out before 1961. The book has been considered by many as a great philosophical achievement in its originality and influentiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology was very quickly recognized as an important statement of French existentialism representing a standpoint distinct from his temporaries of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir among others, reaching far beyond



theories of empiricism and intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition are flawed in their search for knowledge by ignoring the value of the pre-objective position found in our daily, practical lives. This pre-objective position in Merleau-Ponty's terminology is the same as the position which I have explained in the introductory chapter of this essay, namely, in short, this position is based on our direct bodily involvement in the world, as an initial position before one starts reflecting over this initial position. Thus, this is straight to the point which I made in the beginning of this essay by raising the big underlying question about knowledge. Here is to be located the origin of my question. But take notice that Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly ask this question. Further, it is in his lengthy introductory part where Merleau-Ponty forms a frame around his own phenomenological view, parallel to the criticism of the traditional theories. These two aspects go hand in hand for Merleau-Ponty. As already mentioned, this is what I call in my essay "casting the case", with the other words, setting the stage for the coming discussion taking place in Part 2 of this essay. Through his dialogue with the empiricists and the intellectualists Merleau-Ponty establishes the need for re-opening the question concerning our body and the sense experience.

Secondly, I have added the material from his seven lectures concerning with the phenomenology of perception, in order to get an overview of his position, as well as simultaneously proving a frame for me to bring in the sphere of visual arts into the discussion. This standpoint is finally analyzed and processed and seen in vigor with the help of Matthews. Through this process I have formed my own position which is

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merely philosophical debates. Theorists, critics, and artists working with visual arts have been influenced and inspired, as well as they have taken and carried further the started phenomenological course. This has been taking place ever since the publication of 1945 up to the current date. - In this essay, there is no room to expand the discussion to cover a large segment of French existentialism. Nor is there room to go into a discussion concerning the roots of existentialism placed in the writings of Husserl. Husserl is known as the founder of the phenomenological movement further carried on by another German philosopher, namely Heidegger who also has been as an assistant to Husserl. Nor is there room to the writings of Kierkegaard and his *Sickness unto Death* although many parallels can be caught between the lines. Kierkegaard is the source behind my earlier interest of intertwining the positions of extreme subjectivism and the extreme objectivism (ref. Kierkegaard's positions of "as near as [one] can be to itself" and "when furthest away from itself" as well as the "process of growing self-awareness" and that "becoming is a movement from some place, but becoming oneself is a movement at that place". Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, p. 62, 22, 66.) The same applies for the anti-dogmatic position of Nietzsche. Although again, equally many similarities can be found referring to the perspectivist view of Nietzsche as to the Kierkegaard's view concerning with the personal choice and self-awareness. No, instead, I will go straight into the discussion concerning Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. The point here is just to emphasize that Merleau-Ponty is quite distinct from his countrymen and -women dealing with the issues of existentialism. This applies especially to his interest in visual arts. This is an interest which I share with Merleau-Ponty.

very much that of Merleau-Ponty's. - It is of essence for me that Merleau-Ponty is a philosopher who explicit, through out his philosophical position involves the sphere of visual arts as an intertwined part of describing his philosophical position. That of looking at philosophy in the light of the Modern arts provides Merleau-Ponty the needed perspective shift, so that we are able to look at our everyday life at fresh. I would like to mention that in his book, *The World of Perception*, the sphere of Modern arts follows Merleau-Ponty in each of his seven lectures. The message of these lectures is given in a unity of Modern arts and his phenomenology, contrasted with the traditional theories of empiricism and the intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition.

Thirdly, Merleau-Ponty himself discussed explicitly Descartes' Meditations and the respective claims and arguments throughout his *Phenomenology of Perception*. With the other words, Merleau-Ponty's own position is highlighted in the light of Descartes. Merleau-Ponty obviously finds Descartes' writings very fascinating and even complete within their own closed intellectual sphere, but Merleau-Ponty does not find the Cartesian based intellectualism proving a solid fundament how to establish true knowledge concerning the persons, their lives and the world. Merleau-Ponty shows a deep and detailed understanding of Descartes position. This is also to be understood that the writings of Descartes have colored and influenced Merleau-Ponty's philosophical way of thinking in his conviction that the intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition has ignored the value of the practical sphere in its approach.

More exactly, Merleau-Ponty is a great example of that of daring to value and the essence of our direct bodily involvement in the world after Descartes devalued the reliability of knowledge gained by senses second to intelligent. Merleau-Ponty is also a philosopher who discusses Descartes, down to the exact examples given by Descartes himself in his *Meditations*, in impressing and complex detail, a time after a time, each time just seeing the problem from a slightly different perspective. Parallel to his phenomenological way of thinking, Merleau-Ponty discusses and keeps the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition with him all the way as a contrasting element to his own phenomenological way of thinking. This is his way of presenting his phenomenological position, while also in the light of the traditional theories, making this phenomenological position understandable and accessible to a reader in the analytical tradition. As already made mark of, I have chosen to continue in my essay in this tradition. Although the big

difference between Merleau-Ponty's and my writing approach is that I do put forward an underlying question as well as a guiding question while Merleau-Ponty does not. I will also attempt to follow a more step by step structure of presenting my way of understanding Merleau-Ponty, as well as putting forward my solution of taking the course of Merleau-Ponty, hopefully, a step closer to where Merleau-Ponty himself hoped to arrive. Another way of understanding Merleau-Ponty's parallelism is that his own theory has its roots in his way of understanding the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism, in the elements which he found interesting and potential, but flawed. Merleau-Ponty does not deny these traditional theories, but can be understood as taking the best of each theory and modifying the aspects which he finds flawed, towards a better course. Merleau-Ponty adds another depth to understanding our bodily awareness on Part I - the Body, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*.

For the reference I would like to mention, that my understanding of Descartes' Meditations on the First Philosophy is based on the book, *The Philosophical Writing of Descartes*, as well as this is further supplied by *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*. Naturally, my understanding of Descartes has been further strongly influenced by the writings of Merleau-Ponty, as it should be clear for the reader by now. I find this material very actual and activating, as well as in demand of further reflection.

Fourth, as already mentioned, to the direct, complex, demanding and challenging material provided by Merleau-Ponty, I have added the secondary source on Merleau-Ponty by Matthews. This has been of great value for me. Matthews' account has functioned as a guiding, controlling and confirming element so that I have been able to actively test my understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. That of getting familiar with Matthews' view has provided me with a great opportunity not only to compare my understanding of Merleau-Ponty's original texts with Matthews' understanding of this very thorough, layered and perspectivist philosopher dealing with issues of phenomenological philosophy and Modern arts in deep complexity, but also it has helped me to form my own position as a continuation of the process started by Merleau-Ponty. Matthews does along the lines of Merleau-Ponty, explicit discuss the Modern arts and the view of Descartes throughout his book, but Matthews does not include the sphere of Contemporary arts into the discussion. Adding the sphere of Contemporary arts into the discussion is my contribution as an attempt to see

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological position in a fresh light. I understand that Merleau-Ponty's aim was almost equally ambitious as was the aim of the traditional epistemological theories. Merleau-Ponty's saw problems in the traditional theories. He was able to describe them very thoroughly, but in the end he did not achieve to provide as good solution to the problems faced by the traditional theories as he had hoped for. Matthews concludes his book by saying that Merleau-Ponty was defeated in his attempt to unify well enough the spheres of extreme objectivism and the extreme subjectivism<sup>9</sup>. Merleau-Ponty could not solve the problem of objectivism. I will attempt to take this discussion, this aim a step closer to its goal by seeing the discussion at new in the light of the Contemporary visual arts. The problem will be revealed to the reader a step by step throughout this essay.

I conclude for now that Merleau-Ponty is a philosopher who acknowledges the course of history, but he is also very clearly to be understood as an advocate of the thought that we persons live here and now, and that we have intentions about our future. All of these different aspects of time, - past, present, and future, - play an important part in his way of thinking. Merleau-Ponty was very involved in including the then prevailing directions of arts, politics, etc. in his phenomenological position. But he was also very aware of the difficulties of including the prevailing theoretical ideas and practical approaches, because the prevailing ideas were basically too fresh, not available yet in the history books as organized, discussed and analyzed resource.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the two parallel aspects of the traditional theories and the sphere of the Modern arts are with Merleau-Ponty all the way from the start to finish. I wish to continue along the lines sketched by Merleau-Ponty, understood that I will also include the historically strong position of the traditional epistemological view, - which is no less present in the present day course of thought, - as the analytical parallel, as well as I see the potentiality of crossing the spheres of Merleau-Ponty's

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<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xxii.

<sup>10</sup> I limit my self to the scope of the Modern visual arts, while Merleau-Ponty himself includes different branches of the Modern arts to the discussion, such as poetry (ref. Rimbaud) and certain literature styles (ref. Kafka), in addition to others. Merleau-Ponty writes: "It has often been said that modern artists and thinkers are difficult. Picasso is harder to understand, indeed to love, than Poussin or Chardin; the same is said of Giraudoux or Malraux, as opposed to Marivaux or Stendhal. Some, such as Julien Benda, have even drawn the conclusion that modern writers are 'byzantine', are difficult simply because they have nothing to say and peddle subtlety in place of art. Nothing could be further from the truth. If Modern thought is difficult and runs counter to common sense, this is because it is concerned with the truth; experience no longer allows to settle for the clear and straightforward notions which common sense cherishes because they bring peace of mind." (Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p.37.)

phenomenology and the Contemporary arts. I will replace the Modern arts of the times of Merleau-Ponty with the present day Contemporary site-specific and situational visual art projects.

In order to building a comfortable way towards taking up and discussing more in detail the guiding question of *what do we see*, it is important to say a few words how to read Merleau-Ponty. I keep remaining that this

question will eventually take the reader in hand and lead him or her through this essay by exposing the reader to a number of perspective ways of addressing and looking at the different issues of the underlying big question of this essay.

## **2.2 How to read and understand Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception**

So, at this point, I assume that it will be helpful to say a few words about the structure and method of Merleau-Ponty's writings based on describing. This is essential so that the reader can understand how to follow Merleau-Ponty's way of thinking<sup>11</sup>, and also, how to have a key to understand my writings.

The challenge of reading Merleau-Ponty is that he does not put forward his thinking process in a linear and analytical manner. Recall the remark from the previous section, that Merleau-Ponty does not explicit put forward a clear main question as a guiding light for the reader. He simply and plainly starts describing his interest and concern, while continually inviting the parallels of the empirical and intellectual courses in the Cartesian tradition into the discussion. It is left to the reader to grasp and form a question out of Merleau-Ponty's material. The question, which I take to be the driving force motivating Merleau-Ponty in his work, is namely my rephrased version of the old epistemological question which I put forward in the very beginning of this essay. This is a question which I have extracted out of Merleau-Ponty's material based on my understanding of this material.

Merleau-Ponty does not lead the reader through his thought process by analytically discussing an issue by an issue based on clear logical order and causality. This is not the method of phenomenology. But Merleau-Ponty does manage to attack very strongly the very foundations of the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism. That of attacking the foundations of the traditional theories and

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<sup>11</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty A Guide for the Perplexed*, “a manner or style of thinking”, p. 13.

describing his own position, are not to be mixed up. Also, very importantly, I do discuss the practical sphere, but that of describing this sphere is not the same as thinking along the lines of the established conventions accepted by the general common sense.

Here, in this section, the reader will get the first very concrete key how to understand the method of describing. It is difficult to grasp the core of Merleau-Ponty's writings because of his method of describing which is close to being an "anti-analytical" approach. The method of phenomenology is rather to look at the same issue from slightly different points of the view. This reveals new relations between the already mentioned and familiar issues. - Therefore, I draw a parallel between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method and Cézanne's paintings<sup>12</sup>. Merleau-Ponty discusses himself explicit the painting of Cézanne in his text. But he does not compare his own style of writing to Cézanne's style of painting, although he does draw parallels between his philosophical way of thinking and the structure and meaning of Cézanne's paintings. The likeness between Merleau-Ponty's writing style towards building up his view, and Cézanne's painting style revealing his view, is a similarity which I find, or I rather draw out of Merleau-Ponty's way of putting forward his material. Thus, metaphorically, Merleau-Ponty can be understood as building his text like a viewer slowly would discover the world of Cézanne's paintings<sup>13</sup>. For example, look a painting by Cezanne where he puts forward his view of the simple elements such as apples, a bowl, a glass, a knife and a cloth on a table. The relations of the objects to each other in these slightly shifted and altered ways of expressing the reality as seen by Cézanne is of essence. In one way we understand that the painting does not represent reality in its objective and expected way. In the analytical sense it is to be understood that the painting is wrongly constructed as a representative of the reality of the world. The perspectives are not representative of the reality. They are perspectives, which are impossible to be seen from one single standpoint alone in the reality, although they seem to be in a harmony in Cézanne's painting. A careful and patient viewer will discover that the painting in its own world

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<sup>12</sup> Other Modern painters of significance for Merleau-Ponty are: Juan gris, Braque and Picasso (Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 69). I could have equally compared Merleau-Ponty for any one of these painters. For the sake of the clarity, I have decided to limit myself to the more detailed discussion on Cézanne. In addition, it is important to take notice that Merleau-Ponty is not interested in the abstract Modern painting as a link to his phenomenology. it is of importance that the painting show us objects and situations which are recognizable in their relation to the reality.

<sup>13</sup> Cezanne's painting from ca. 1879.

is “right”. The painting is interesting and pleasant to look at. There is carefully chosen relations between the objects, the objects are organized in space, in depth in relation to each other, while the painting initially looks quite flat. Slowly, multiple layers of information are revealed to a viewer, if one looks at the painting for long enough. It takes time to move the gaze from perspective to perspective and to learn to appreciate them in this world of their own, in the framework of the painting. The issue of context is to be noticed, and how familiar objects are expressed at fresh to us. Cézanne’s paintings show the artist’s inner expressions of the pictured in a sense that his paintings were not objectively true to the colors and perspectives of the exterior world as viewed based on the scientific view. His expression on the canvas distorted the common sense based perceived reality by adding his very own personal interpretation of the expressed in terms of the non-imitating colors of the real. As Matthews explains, “in modern art, perspective is often ignored, things have blurred outlines and colors that differ from ‘what they should be’, and the shapes and arrangements of things may seem to us to be distorted.”<sup>14</sup>

Further, the painting expresses Cézanne’s personal experience of the world to the larger community of viewers. Simply, this is Cézanne’s way of communicating with others. This is his way of showing his understanding of the world, in which we live, to others in this world. Merleau-Ponty does not mention the above painting by Cézanne, which I have chosen to discuss here. But Merleau-Ponty himself refers to a landscape painted by Cézanne, without giving the name or the year of the painting. In this context Merleau-Ponty says the following about many painters since Cézanne:

“Thus different areas of their paintings are seen from different points of view. The lazy viewer will see “errors of perspective” here, while those who look closely will get the feel of a world in which no two objects are seen simultaneously, a world in which regions of space are separated by the time it takes to move our gaze from one to another, a world in which being is not given but rather emerges over time. Thus space is no longer a medium of simultaneous object capable of being apprehended by an absolute observer who is equally close to them all, a medium without point of view, without body and spatial position - in sum, the medium of pure intellect. As Jean Paulhan remarked recently, the space of Modern painting is ‘space which the heart feels’, space in which we

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<sup>14</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 136.

too are located, space which is close to us and with which we are organically connected.”<sup>15</sup>

In his text, Merleau-Ponty applies a layer by layer method, adding a perspective after a perspective, therefore also expressing and lighting up a depth after a depth of his view. A relation after a relation is revealed. This relationality is of great importance and adds a great complexity to the issues under the investigation. Little by little, Merleau-Ponty’s text takes shape and shows and reflects a structure and a meaning. Now, pay attention, I just touched an issue, namely that of meaning being inseparable from its context, which will be of a great essence in this essay, in the coming chapters and sections. That the meaning cannot be seen or grasped without acknowledging its setting, and the relations between the objects, has a great relevance to the already mentioned position of transitoriness consisting of its location in us persons, and in the process of learning. Based on the view sketch by Merleau-Ponty, I take this issue of meaning being inseparable from its context to have an essential relation to that what we see. Remember, that the question which will guide the reader throughout this essay is the question *of what do we see*.

Now, I would like to ask you to do something. - But before I will ask you to do that something, I will sketch a few assumptions about the situation in which you are finding yourself at the moment, as well as I will need to give you some instructions concerning the coming action. First of all, I assume that you are seated at the moment. And please, stay seated, do not change your position, just keep reading as you have been doing. The first instruction is that, when I will ask you to do that coming something, just raise your head straight ahead, but do not turn your head to the either side, just sort of freeze your head in a fixed, upraised position for a minute or so, and let your gaze to wonder. The second instruction will encourage you, when engaged in that action, to take in impressions about anything your gaze will be able to get hold on. Maybe you will view something particular very close to you, as well as you will catch a view of something in a distance. Maybe there is a window or two within the reach of your gaze so that you could get a glance of something beyond the room. Through the third instruction I will ask you simply to enjoy the composition revealed in front of your eyes. I will encourage you just simply to look and to accept

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<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 41.



the view without being critical about it. I will ask you to be critical later, so leave that action of mind for later. The fourth and the last instruction says, when finally asked, take your time, and let your gaze to wonder preferably closer to a minute, before returning back to reading. - Now, please, according to the instructions, do the following: Raise your head up and let your gaze to wonder for about a minute.

Thank you for gazing up.

- I assume that now the reader would like to get an explanation concerning the purpose and the relevance of the above experiment. Let me try to explain. I find a great relevance and a link between the above example, - which is mine, - and the painting structure applied by Cezanne, and Merleau-Ponty's writing approach and method. I believe that the method of painting used by Cézanne can be compared and paralleled with that of sitting on a chair, having a view in front of one's eyes. I believe that it is difficult to say that there is only one subjective perspective in front of one's eyes. One is in somewhat fixed position, but the gaze travels from something seen in the distance to something seen closer. The head is still, but the gaze travels and keeps traveling and discovering different depths and aspects of the view in front. The view is composed of different perspectives, and different depths. The view revealed in front of one's eyes is not based on a single frozen and fixed perspective.

If one would look at a Classical painting, the copied reality imitated and presented, would in a way take one's hand and lead one through the painting, with the help of the central perspective. In the classical painting the placement and the impression of each object seems to be carefully calculated and measured based on the mathematical principles. The information what the painting conveys is clear, precise, and determinate. The presented stays true to the colors seen in the reality. Also, the sizes and the appearances of the objects in their relations to each other are represented in these paintings as they are understood in the reality. The chosen frozen perspective comfortably and systematically leads one into the picture's indefinite focus point, into the objective eternity, into the deep infinitive depth of the painting's perspective without losing one along the way. The dogmatic way would be paved and presented clearly to the observer, without giving alternatives to be considered. The presented impression is that nothing could be taken away, and nothing could be added to these masterpieces of the Classical era. The Classical way of painting is a certain kind of a scientific way of compromising and representing the external world objectively, as

true to its color and appearance. The subjective position of the painter is not present. Also, there is a distance between the viewer and the painting the viewer is looking at. Thus, there is distance between the subject and the object under the investigation. The situation is characterized as passive. With the other words, the Classical painting keeps the viewer in a distance.<sup>16</sup>

Well, this is not the way to go for Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, there are many alternatives to be considered, and the road is not clear or determinate in advance. Merleau-Ponty is after to establish that what we see, is not the calculated and objective world view as a chosen compromised perspective view acting in accordance with the causal and law like principles of science. In contrast, according to Merleau-Ponty, there are multiple perspectives and multiple depths, and therefore also multiple relations, for us to ponder over. In the initial phrase, his text is to be understood as a vague and proximate composition within a large frame. A chapter after a chapter, this composition starts forming a clearer and a clearer appearance through further discussions concerning the different elements viewed from different perspectives in new relations within this frame. There are layers and layers of information which cannot be discussed once and for all, and then put on the side and not mentioned again. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach might seem like a self-repeating system, but it is not. The phenomenological method of describing and viewing the issues from only slightly different angles is not to be understood as unnecessary repetition, but rather as adding another angle and a relation to the issue and therefore also adding another depth to the issue. Merleau-Ponty does not see anything in isolation. Isolation within the world is impossible for him. That what we see is seen in a relation to something else. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is to be understood as it is build, not from foundations in a traditional sense, but as like Cezanne's painting revealing information gradually. Merleau-Ponty's text is to be discovered by reading a word by a word, a page after a page. As a result of this writing method, Merleau-Ponty's philosophical view is not easily reached and grasped by the reader. Although, it can be said, that his writing method reflects his phenomenological position. This way understood Merleau-Ponty is very consequent. Slowly, over time, the reader, will arrive closer to a whole which reveals a great intensity and complexity when appreciated correctly. It is to be recognized that through his layered and perspectivist

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<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 40.

approach Merleau-Ponty slowly builds up towards a peculiar kind of a holistic phenomenological position. This is an important fact to kept in mind when reading my paper, although, I will try to put the issues forward as logically and as much as possible in a step by step approach, in order to lead the reader through the text in a coherent and logical manner. Now, recall the aspect of the practical sphere and reflect over the following: Merleau-Ponty is interested in describing the everyday situations, not analyzing them by reason. The point is to describe that what we see, and not analytically explain how that what we see is to be constructed.

## **PART 2 – CONTRASTING THE CASE**

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### **Chapter 3 - The historical background with the focus in the subject-object relation.**

#### **3.1 The purpose of contrasting the case**

In an attempt to describe and explain what I mean by the already said, I need to further contrast my view with something that the majority of the philosophers in the Western philosophical tradition feel comfortable with. Since the big underlying question deals with knowledge, I'll present and contrast, my view in the background of the well established and well known theories of empiricism and intellectualism dealing with the question of knowledge. That of taking up the traditional epistemological question dealing with certain knowledge, together with the phenomenological approach, highlights the differences between these courses. This makes it easier for the reader to understand why Merleau-Ponty sees a need to revise the question when it has to do with us persons and not alone by the scientific knowledge. This parallel approach will serve as a clarifying element in order to grasp why the traditional theories are flawed, as understood by Merleau-Ponty. This serves as a ground why Merleau-Ponty sees a need for putting forward his phenomenology of perception as an alternative for empiricism and intellectualism. I believe that by this approach the reader will get a better understanding of both of these positions.

#### **3.2 Returning to the issues of the theoretical and the practical spheres**

Now, it is at its place to have a more detailed discussion of the empiricism and the intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition. Now I am returning to the beginning of this essay. - I keep reminding the reader, that by now slightly different perspectives and depths have been added to the ongoing discussion in this essay. This is to be understood, that the material in the coming sections and chapters will be constantly seen and understood from a wider and more complex perspective, and therefore also understood differently than initially. - Remember that this is the method used by

Merleau-Ponty, as well as this is the technique used by me in this essay. So don't take it as an unnecessary repetition that I return to the same issues, a time after a time, each time seen from to some extent more saturated position. This is a way of forming a holistic position, establishing a common ground for further reflection and for exchanging ideas, while not losing our personal involvement. With the other words, this way I keep the objective and the reflective, stepping-on-the-side-gaze with me, while I simultaneously hold onto and accept my subjectivity in this world as an individual, as well as I aim to communicate with others.

Thus, let's return to the issues of the theoretical and the practical spheres from a perspective of an added complexity. As known traditionally, epistemology has been dealing with the question of certain truth(s), and how to arrive or establish something as certain and true. Remember, that I pull out from the lengthy introductory section of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, that in its very root, that of gaining knowledge, has to do with the subject-object relation. - The very problem of the traditional theories is that there is a distance between the perceiver and that of perceiving the world. Another way of seeing this is that we have forgotten what it is to live in the world. We have gone straight to that of theorizing while ignoring our very roots in this world.

The difficult thing to accept about Merleau-Ponty is that he insists that before we can start talking about that of gaining knowledge, we need to establish what it is to live in the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, the traditional theories base that of gaining certain knowledge on theorizing. This needs to be discussed according to Merleau-Ponty. It is of great essence to keep in mind that the important difference between the traditional theories and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is that Merleau-Ponty is not primarily interested of that of gaining knowledge, he is interested in describing how we exists in the world, and how we only through this can have access to knowledge. If put in Matthews' words, this is expressed in a following manner:

“Merleau-Ponty, however, is not primarily concerned with our relation to the world as knowers, that is, with our cognitive relation to thing. Cognitive relations to objects are themselves dependent on a more primitive kind of involvement with them, which must be described before we can understand the meaning which more abstract concepts possess. Before we can know what things are in the world, and what characteristics and relations

to other things those things have, we must first be involved with things as a much more basic level. Living in the world comes first, knowing about it comes later.”<sup>17</sup>

In order to understand and accept the above summary by Matthews, it is important to look into more detailed criticism of the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism given by Merleau-Ponty. So, what does Merleau-Ponty aim to show here? He aims to show that the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism are halting when concerning the subject-object relation, that of subjectivism and objectivism; one representing extreme subjectivism and the other representing extreme objectivism, if taken in their polarized ends. Merleau-Ponty utilizes these very extreme positions in order to further color and emphasize his phenomenological aim. This is what I call contrasting the case. - Merleau-Ponty himself has said that “probably the chief gain from [his] phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism [empiricism] and extreme objectivism [intellectualism] in its notion of the world or of rationality”<sup>18</sup>. Keep this phenomenological aim in mind. I will return in more detail into this particular claim in my conclusion. But before it is possible to view this aim from the desired perspective and depth, it is important to include the issues provided by the historical aspects as an added angle and insight for the coming discussion in Part 3.

### **3.3 What do we see as contrasted with, what do we ought to see**

The fundamentals of the empiricism and the intellectualism in Cartesian tradition are very different, empiricism taking the sense experience to be the origin behind all knowledge and intellectualism relaying on mind based rational thought while viewing the sense experience to be of secondary value. Although these traditional courses are based on fundamentals very distinct and broadly taken nearly opposing from each other, they have in common that their main concern is on what we ought to see, instead of focusing on that what we see.<sup>19</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, the difference between that of what we ought to see and what we see is of utmost, essential importance. This attitude of what we ought to see implies that the world is taken in its objective sense and

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<sup>17</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xxii.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 33.

viewed as something precise and entirely determined. “The world is posited in the first place”<sup>20</sup>. The world functions as a reference. The standard is set by the objective world and not by the person viewing the world within the empirical or the intellectual courses. Both of these traditional theories, despite of being built on distinct fundamentals, are analytical in a sense that they aim to see objectively. To this attitude of what we ought to see objectively, Merleau-Ponty refers to as to that of analytical perception. Another way of expressing this is, in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, is to say that analytical perception aims to see what we ought to see while the objective world sets the standard of measure, and not the person who is observing. Thus, the person, engaged within these two traditional courses, does not have the central or originating reference point for that of perceiving. This implies that there is a distance between an empiricist and the way he treats perception, and the same applies for an intellectualist, there as well is a distance between an intellectualist and the way he treats perception.<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty aims to turn the focus to that what we see instead of that what we ought to see objectively and determinately. The subject-object relation is in the core of that what we see as contrasted with, what we ought to see.

Putting the focus on that what we see includes a shift of the positions. The world will not be put on the first place. Instead, it will be the person who through his own body will be put in the first place within the world.

As a whole, Merleau-Ponty’s aim is to put forward his own theory of perception in the light of his phenomenology that will provide an alternative for overcoming the epistemological problems faced within perception by both empiricism and intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition. Merleau-Ponty’s aim within his introduction is to discuss in detail how these traditional theories are flawed in their argumentations concerning the search for knowledge. A one way of expressing this is, according to Merleau-Ponty, that the rational standpoint is characterized as if one always knows what one is looking for. This could also be expressed by asking, what is the point of looking for something if one already knows in advance what one is looking for. If one would know what one is looking for, he should not be searching. Or, on the other hand, if one would realize that the empiricist’s failure is that he misses the point that one needs to know that one is looking for something, otherwise one should not be

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<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 30.



searching.<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty is very much aware of that these traditional, well-established theories are strong and thorough in their argumentations. Therefore, it is crucial for Merleau-Ponty to go into a detailed and many-sided dialogue with the empiricists and the intellectuals so that he will be able to discuss the flaws and strengths of both of these traditional theories in their search for knowledge. According to Merleau-Ponty, their biggest flaw follows as a result of forgetting to pay attention to our practical everyday life which seems to be taken granted by these theories. According to Merleau-Ponty, we can search access to knowledge by studying our everyday life, and how we are situated in these daily events of our practical life. Therefore the underlying suggestion is that the study of us persons will lead us towards grasping how to gain access to knowledge bringing events.

Merleau-Ponty's intention is to establish a ground, or call it a framework, within what we persons can start the search for knowledge. Merleau-Ponty believes that it is through our bodily existence in the lived world that will give us access to knowledge. This is what Merleau-Ponty is after to establish. But keep in mind that Merleau-Ponty is not after to establish a purely subjective view, nor a purely objective view or a view based on any kind of a causal rules.

So, how are we to be understanding Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology dealing with the questions of person's lived everyday life before it takes up the question concerning the search for knowledge? One way of understanding Merleau-Ponty's approach is that he is taking a step back, to the moments preceding the actual search for knowledge. But why? Why not to continue that of searching for certain knowledge as the traditional theories have done ever since the times of Plato in the Western philosophical tradition? Why is Merleau-Ponty skeptical to this tradition? Why does he not follow this analytical tradition? - Hasn't this epistemological concern how to gain certain knowledge been raised, answered, and appreciated, by both the traditional empirical and intellectual courses, throughout the Western philosophical history ever since the Ancient times of Greece? - Didn't Aristotle establish the theory of the natural world meaning that all of our knowledge has its roots in, as well as is lead from, our sense experiences? Didn't Descartes closer to 2000 years later in his *Six Meditations* published in 1641 refuse the empirically founded Aristotelian view of

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<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 33.

gaining certain knowledge, and re-estate the role of senses as secondary to the unquestionable epistemological truths arrived by the rational thought based on the rule of clear and distinct perception? How about Kant, as a rationalist in Cartesian tradition aiming to structure the sense-experience, building on Hume's empiricism based on habituality, only 40 years after the first publication of Descartes' *Six Meditations* in his *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 put forward his Copernican revolution claiming that it is impossible for us persons to know anything about the world independent of human experience. However, Kant did not reject the prevailing scientific ideal of aiming to see the objective and universal truth which clearly implies that although Kant realized the importance of the person in the center, he still kept the objective world as the reference point along the rational Cartesian thought. - So, hasn't the question of senses been discussed and emptied from all of its potential mysteries throughout the history, by both the empiristically and intellectually based philosophical theories?

Now, let's return to the helping question of this essay, and further, why to ask this particular question. - As you remember, throughout the essay, this question will be taken up and discussed from the different perspectives, in different context, which all together form a larger whole, entity. - So, why to ask the question of *what do we see*? What does that of seeing have to do with the position, life and meaning of a person in the world? - First of all, isn't that of seeing based on one of the five senses known as sense experiences of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting? And after this has been said, isn't it natural to think, based on the reasoning of the traditional epistemological theorizing, that the position, the life and the meaning of us persons in the world should not be described in terms of seeing, or any other sense experiences if the aim is to establish something certain and indubitable? Since isn't it natural to doubt the reliability and value of the human sense of seeing based on the strong and predominant scientific and mathematical view that the knowledge achieved by sense experiences, - including that of seeing -, is to be rated as secondary to the knowledge established by intellect?

- Thus, ever since the times of Plato in Western analytical philosophy the objectivity and the rational thought based on pure and impersonal reason has hold the highest and the most true and the optimal value. But no, this objectivity is not the way to go for Merleau-Ponty, - as already indicated in comparison to the Classical painting. According to Merleau-Ponty, the traditional theories seem to have forgotten

the importance of the basic everyday life in which we persons, through our bodies in direct experience with the world, are engaged throughout our lives. The direct contact with our everyday lives is the key to understand that of being a person, according to Merleau-Ponty. A direct experience with the world in which we live has to do with our sense experience, such as seeing. Simply, the human perspective as a basis for all reflection and theorizing as a initial condition taking place in our daily lives is needed here. And this leads to the reopening of the question concerning the role of senses.<sup>23</sup>

### **3.4 Reopening the problem of sense experience**

Thus, the intention of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of these traditional theories, is to be taken as reopening the problem of sense experience. Merleau-Ponty puts the focus once again to the questions as what is it to see, to hear, to feel, to sense something; what is it to have a sense experience?<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty is asking in his introduction, what role does the sense experience play in our everyday lived lives and in the search for access to knowledge. The role of sense experience is to be followed like a guiding, underlying red line going through the different perspectives discussed in this essay, and in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* as in this essay. However, - I am taking into discussion only a limited aspect of this. This limited aspect, which is of my interest, is the essence of the visual experience. Another important layer added to the discussion is that of describing the structure of consciousness and the structure of that of perceived based on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* while limited to that of seeing.

The basic idea behind this pre-objective and pre-reflected position is that it's through our bodies that we temporarily exist in the world. This claim inevitably leads to that of re-establishing the role of senses after Descartes. The value of the uncertain and undecided will be recognized as having the initial key value for our existence and therefore also for our access to knowledge. This pre-objective position, which we can access by describing our daily lives, points towards a subjective sphere of experience. Bodily awareness is subjective and individual. The subjective and the objective have been traditionally viewed as two separate spheres. Merleau-Ponty is after to unify these previously clearly distinguished spheres of subjectivism and objectivism. According to him, the subject and the object relation should not be understood as two

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<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 12.

separate positions, but as intertwined. But why is it important to achieve the subject object relationship as intertwined? - Because through this we can grasp that the meaning is inseparable from the context. Merleau-Ponty is very much aware that we are conscious beings. As he himself states that “all consciousness is consciousness of something”<sup>25</sup>. That the seen has a structure and that the structure, or the arrangement of the elements, carries a meaning which is intertwined with the structure of our perceptual consciousness. Further, in the structure of the perceptual consciousness learning plays a crucial role.

Merleau-Ponty sees that parallel to the structure of the seen and the structure of the perceptual consciousness, us as persons are to be understood together with our actions. He claims that the meaning of a person is inseparable from the actions he or she undertakes. He is after that we need to understand us persons in order to understand how to have access to “a ‘knowledge-bringing event’”<sup>26</sup>. In this event learning plays a key role. His phenomenological approach will give us a true access to knowledge about ourselves and about the world in which we live. Merleau-Ponty encourages us to see the value in something what is not yet determinate and clear, where there is room for development and learning. The point of this is that we will get a deeper understanding of us persons and of our nature. Through this we will better grasp what it is to be a person, as well as how do we gain knowledge after having access to this “‘knowledge-bringing event’”<sup>27</sup>. The fundamental and the most important function of perception is, according to Merleau-Ponty, to lay the foundations for all of our knowledge from mathematical and geometrical truths to that of feeling pleasure and pain.<sup>28</sup>

Merleau-Ponty takes this bodily existence to refer to the sense experience basically saying that “sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life”<sup>29</sup>. But what does Merleau-Ponty mean by the above statement? - Well, it can be understood that to Merleau-Ponty perception creates, and even more so establishes the initial and the vital condition as “the background from which all acts stand out”<sup>30</sup>. Merleau-Ponty’s

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<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xix.

<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xi.

phenomenology of perception stands for that of investigating the nature of a person's bodily existence. The position that Merleau-Ponty takes can in its ultimate intention be understood in a following way: Merleau-Ponty is supreme of its kind as an opponent of Cartesian rationalism and absolutist thought. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* has the aim of doing exactly the same as Descartes did in his time to then prevailing Aristotelian theory of the natural world through his Six Meditations. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's aim is to undermine the Cartesian based intellectualism and empiricism as solid and certain sources of true knowledge. - Let's review in short what Descartes did in his time, before going any further. What did Descartes do? In his time, Descartes' aim was to replace the then prevailing Aristotelian thought that all of our knowledge has its roots in and is lead from our sense experiences. Descartes method of questioning the prevailing Aristotelian theory was to involve the reader in a skeptical argument without ever directly mentioning the predominating Aristotelian thought. Descartes' skeptical argument was presented in a form of six meditations. In these six meditations Descartes invited the reader to meditate, to follow his theoretic thought experiment with Descartes himself, and finally to conclude in his new metaphysical foundations as a foundation for knowledge. Descartes intention for anyone participating in this metaphysical, skeptical argument was to find some certainty in something. Descartes believed that if he could establish one certain truth, this would eventually lead to the discovery of further truths, therefore rebuilding a new, solid and lasting foundation for knowledge. Descartes believed that all knowledge has its foundation in the metaphysical truth(s). If we cannot establish some metaphysical truths and have a solid, indubitable metaphysical foundation, we cannot have epistemological truths either. The theory of knowledge rests on the first philosophy. Descartes analytical method and thought experiment found the first truth in the pure, only intellectually accessible cogito-argument by using the clear and distinct perception as a guiding and proof giving rule in this search while turning away and leaving behind the body-based senses as doubtful sources of knowledge. Thus, after reconstructing the foundations of knowledge based on the first and principle truth of the rational thought, as a final touch Descartes reevaluated the role of senses as a secondary to the rational thought, - functioning in an union of the mind and body.<sup>31</sup> Descartes claimed that the role and

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<sup>31</sup> Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*, p. 55.

function of senses was correctional taking care of body's well being, - a desired and necessary function which again was guaranteed by God. - And now, Merleau-Ponty is asking us once more, as did Descartes do in his time, to reevaluate the role of senses in knowledge. Merleau-Ponty is questioning both the traditional empiricism and intellectualism (rationalism) resting on the Cartesian dualistic tradition after Descartes.

In principle, I take that Merleau-Ponty's approach is that of going straight to the foundations of these traditional theories by criticizing the very foundations and therefore the nature of these theories, - without getting lost in details and further explanations -, by questioning the origins and therefore the solidity and certainty of these foundations. This approach is exactly the same as that of Descartes in his Six Meditations. The difference is just that Descartes used doubt as an inviting and effective tool to draw the reader to go through a meditation in solitude, while Merleau-Ponty uses a dialectic approach throughout his investigation as an equally attractive and powerful tool. - Well, history seems to repeat itself when Merleau-Ponty sets to re-evaluate the role of sense once again by going to the roots of the well-established theories of empiricism and intellectualism. By doing this Merleau-Ponty reopens the question of senses once more, as did Descartes after Aristotle. Thus, the role of senses in a relation to knowledge is one of the red lines going through and to be followed in Merleau-Ponty's dialogue with the empiricists and intellectualists.

Merleau-Ponty's aim of undermining the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism is accomplished by describing the structure of perception according to each of these traditional theories. The structure of perception is to be taken as including both the structure of a person's consciousness and the structure of the seen. Further, according to Merleau-Ponty through the structure of the perception alone can we grasp what perception is.<sup>32</sup> And through the structure of perception it is possible to describe the essence and nature of perception.

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<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 4.

## Chapter 4 - The World

### 4.1 The person's position in the world

Now, recall from the beginning of this essay, my claim that I take it given that the world exists independent of us persons. This claim has its clear roots in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty takes that the world is there already before this inquiry about the person's origins starts. - Yet, it is through his phenomenology, as a study of a person's bodily existence, that Merleau-Ponty describes the person's position in the world. This is the initial starting position towards the first important step when following Merleau-Ponty's set-up. For him, the world serves as a natural setting in which perception takes place as a "background from which all acts stand out"<sup>33</sup>. This can be further illustrated by Merleau-Ponty's own words when he states that "the body is the vehicle of through which we are temporarily anchored in the world"<sup>34</sup>.

At this point it is important to discuss in detail that of the world in the first place. What does Merleau-Ponty mean by saying that the world is there already before this inquiry about the being's origins starts? What is this discussion about the objective world and perception? This could be further illustrated by a following example:

It is assumed that the physical world in its determinate sense is already there. The question is what is visual perception, or what does one see? Merleau-Ponty illustrates this with help of an example discussing that of seeing "a landscape on a misty day"<sup>35</sup>. One does not see the landscape clearly. The landscape is apparently perceived as disappearing gradually into the monotonous grayness, - although one knows, or one ought to see that the entire determinate and unmysterious landscape is there. Merleau-Ponty agrees with empiricists and intellectualists that the world itself in its objective sense is determined, based on the analytical perception. However, at the moment, temporarily the landscape is perceived as indeterminate, unclear and vague. The more distant parts appear to vanish into the deep, thick grey mist and therefore being temporarily hidden for the viewer. And therefore, with the other words, as a result of the misty weather, these more distant parts of the world, are not visible at the

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<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xii

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 7.

moment. Although, through the analytical perception with the help of paying attention and judging, one is able to conclude that objectively in its real sense the landscape is determinate and that the distant parts are there despite of the fact that momentarily one is not able to see these distant parts.

How we perceive the world based on the natural perception varies, not only from day to day, but also from person to person. The natural perception is not a counter example or the opposite of the analytical perception, it is just different from the analytical perception. The natural perception is indeterminate in its nature, and therefore easily confusing. In this visual sense experience one perceives something. This perceived something is by its nature vague, undecided, uncertain, and undefined. Further, the perceived is shaped by its context and can be understood in more than one way. Here, again, now just from a slightly different perspective, the structure of the perceived as something contextual and equivocal in its meaning is recognizable. Recall the examples of Modern painting from the Part 1 and reflect over the above sentence in light of that example, as well as the example of the landscape in the misty weather. Also, the structure of consciousness, with an opening towards the process of learning, is recognizable in both of these examples. As Merleau-Ponty himself expresses this, “the perceived, by its nature, admits of the ambiguous, the shifting, and is shaped by its context”<sup>36</sup>. Further, he states that “[W]e must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon”, and that “[I]ts meaning is an equivocal meaning; we are concerned with an expressive value rather than with logical signification.”<sup>37</sup>

Further, according to Merleau-Ponty, that of perceiving something is not the same as understanding something. The epistemological problem of visual perception arises when we perceive something else than what we objectively conclude with. The key issue here is that the meaning is not separable from the seen, and this is what “causes the problem of perception to reappear”<sup>38</sup>.

The above landscape example also lights up, - again -, the method of phenomenology just from a slightly different angle in the light in this context. Phenomenology is based on the idea of describing the real rather than by constructing

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<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 41.



or forming it<sup>39</sup>. Describing is not the same as explaining or understanding. Therefore, it follows that categorically, according to Merleau-Ponty, perception differs from judgements, acts, and predications.<sup>40</sup> To him perception is that of seeing something, tasting something, hearing something, sensing something. - Within the visual experience, seeing something can provide us some knowledge about the world and its objects and about ourselves. It is possible to describe the real based on the natural perception, as well as it is possible to explain the real by analytical perception. The difference is that one perceives the real, and when one describes the real instead of analyzing the real, one will be faced with the possibility of variation within the results. Merleau-Ponty's 'notion of the real' refers to the world. "The world is what we perceive"<sup>41</sup>, and everything what we perceive is perceived in the context of the world.

Merleau-Ponty takes the objective world from the first place where it is positioned by the empiricists and intellectualists. Merleau-Ponty puts the focus on the person himself and his temporal bodily existence as the anchor through which the person exists and views the world. This is to be understood that the center and therefore the first place is located in us, in persons, and it is to follow the first place is not any longer given justifiably to the objective world. - However, as a matter of fact, there is nothing new about this position that a person is put in the center of the investigation. Now, recall again the issue of perspectivism, as discussed earlier in relation to Kant. Remember, Kant in his time rejected the prevailing metaphysics based on the idea that it is possible to gain knowledge about the world independent of human experience. Kant turned the focus to us, to a person in the center (the Copernican revolution). However, he did not reject the scientific ideal of aiming to see the objective and universal. This implies that although Kant realized the importance of the person in the center, he still kept the objective world as the reference point.

Thus, Kant in his time insisted that it is impossible for us humans, us persons to know anything about the world independent of experience. Yet, Kant claimed that the

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<sup>39</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xi. My note: The analytical method used by Descartes is problematic for Merleau-Ponty in that of establishing and describing knowledge, especially concerning "that of its own beginning" (Merleau-Ponty, *ibid.*, p.44). According to Merleau-Ponty, the analytical doctrine is regressive which gets away with everything else except its own beginning.

<sup>40</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xi. My note: Predications can be viewed as stating an assumed attribute, quality or property.

<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xviii.

human experience taking place was dependent of certain pre-requisite conditions. Kant stated that these necessary conditions which must be fulfilled in order for us persons to be able to have any sense based experience and therefore the possibility of gaining knowledge. For Kant these necessary conditions were the 1) space and time, 2) that of understanding referred to as the basic concepts in their respective categories, and 3) “the forms of reason”<sup>42</sup>. I take this to mean that nor is Kant a clean-cut empiricist, neither a rationalist, instead of he is to be understood as a some kind of a hybrid of empiricism and intellectualism in a way. With the other words, Kant is a Rational empiricist in Cartesian tradition.

Another way of putting this is to say that it can be understood that Kant is a representative of Rational empiricism in the Cartesian tradition by taking the empirical sense experience as the base of all knowledge, as the necessary requirement, while still holding on to the rationalistic thought aiming to see the world in the first place, as to give the ultimate value to the objective and universal way of seeing and understanding and appreciating the world, the exterior world, the “things-in-themselves (Dinge an sich)”<sup>43</sup> despite of that we never can view them that way. Kantian hold on to a thought that all one knows and all one sees, is through the filters of a person’s own colored view. More exactly, while one’s object of interest is the objective world, the exterior world as understood in its scientific sense meaning as it is “objectively and not as subjectively, individually understood, but as it is understood by everyone based on general, agreed rules and principles, knowledge found using methods based upon well-established facts and obeying well-established laws, thorough and accurate, describing and defining the real world, the exterior world which one never sees exactly as it is, but always through one’s personal filter. Kant had an important and crucial, a fundamental essence in that discovery, he just simply did not investigate it enough, according to Merleau-Ponty.

It can be understood that Merleau-Ponty takes this hybrid-idea of Kant further and not only puts the human body in the center, but also recognizes that there is a value in that of seeing the world as we see it, not objectively, but subjectively, combining our “sense-experience-information-knowledge-bringing-initial-event” and that of reflecting over that pre-objective situation. “The body is not an object in the world,

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<sup>42</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, p.291.

<sup>43</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 462.

but it is the subject's own point of the view on the world"<sup>44</sup>. A person is characterized as a spatio-temporal person with access to ever changing perspectives, views of the world. It can be said that a person's position in the world gives arise to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological position that describes how a person has access to and establishes knowledge of the world and of himself. For Merleau-Ponty, the primary, and the only "certain" is to found in us person.

## **Chapter 5 - A dialogue with an empiricist**

### **5.1 Concerning the experience error**

Merleau-Ponty asks how to verify that what we perceive based on empiricism. Here, I will provide an example based on Merleau-Ponty's own example<sup>45</sup>. My example is following: Think along the lines of the following example: One is walking along a track one has never before taken. The track passes through open landscape of rolling hills, corn fields, and woods of pine trees. The ground is partially sandy and covered by moss. The day is clear, and one is preoccupied with the music heard through one's headphones, played by one's iPod. One sees a brownish-grey wooden plank on the ground, and a few seconds later, one discovers even more of these planks of brownish-grey wood on the ground. Obviously these brownish-grey, wooden planks have been part of some kind of a construction. Some planks are by themselves, detached from the rest of the construction, some are still attached to others. Some sort of a force has been applied to these wooden elements of a construction so that they have come a part. One absorbs these visual impressions, and starts constructing an assumption, or several assumptions, in one's mind. One has seen small huts and houses along the track one has walked. - Maybe these wooden pieces have been a hut that has seen better days? Or maybe the wooden planks have been part of something else? One has only past experiences and previous knowledge about the place to go after, or one's imagination. One has no evidence, for what the wooden pieces have been used for. One is going slightly up hill, but one just cannot see over the hill yet. At the moment, when one has reached the point that one can see beyond the hill, one

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<sup>44</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 558.

<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 20.

sees a lake, and an old stranded, half destroyed brownish-grey wooden boat. It is still obvious that the object has been a rowboat although it is missing almost half of its other side and the front of the boat is badly demolished. - Merleau-Ponty's point is that empiricism in its forming and verification of knowledge, is based on the single, atomic impressions, which are put together in one's mind, and that this information gained by these single impressions can only be verified to be true or false afterwards, after a certain hypothesis is put forward. Impressions by themselves cannot be linked to other impressions. The linking of these single impression happens in one's mind and is based on further impressions and previous experiences. This is arbitrary, according to Merleau-Ponty, and therefore cannot function as a basis for veridical knowledge. According to Merleau-Ponty, within empiricism, one can only reason backwards starting from the result, or the given discovery. One can reason that the single impressions together construct the given discovery. Call it a truth, a piece of knowledge. But one cannot take a single impression and link it directly to that piece of final information and knowledge. Neither can one lead final information or knowledge directly from the single impressions. The linking of these pieces of information is subjective, and happens in one's mind. - If thought further along the given scenario, how about if one would have decided to turn around, right there and then, before reaching the point where one was able to see over the hill to the lake and to the demolished boat. How could one then have solved the puzzle of the brownish-grey wooden planks found on the sandy, mossy ground among the pine trees? Would these single impressions, based on empiricism, then have been just some single impressions that one would have passed in one's mind, not really bothering to reflect over what were they about?

Let's add another aspect to the above scenario. Take that the person in the above example was not walking alone. The person was walking together with a friend. The friend preferred directing his gaze towards the scenery on the left side of the track than on the right side of the track. He had forgotten to bring along his sunglasses and was therefore more comfortable facing towards left, turning away from the sun. Along the way he saw impressions of hay poles and tractors, cows and calves, while his friend wearing sunglasses and listening to his iPod saw old wooden huts and barns on the right side. Their experiences are different. Also, their hypothesis concerning the wooden blanks on the ground, on both sides of the track, are influenced by their previous impressions seen along the way, as well as by their past memories. The point

is that it is arbitrary which past influences one draws into the current problem-solving, there is no guarantee which of one's past experiences the current is linked with. It is arbitrary which previous experience seems to be drawn into the solving of the scenario. The knowledge cannot be verified with the help of associations, past experiences and memories when this linking happens arbitrary in one's mind. Associations and the reasoning can be applied afterwards, but this sort of paying attention has no power of solving that of perceived by itself. That of attention within empiricism only works as a searchlight in the darkness, revealing what is already there, in accordance with a scientific, intellectual method.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the basis for veridical knowledge which an empiricist puts forward is flawed according to Merleau-Ponty.

### **5.2 Concerning 'the constancy hypothesis' and its principle structure**

Now, recall the role of the objective world within empiricism. The priority of the world, - the misunderstood placing of the world in the first place, - can be explained by “‘the constancy hypothesis’”<sup>47</sup>, according to Merleau-Ponty. The idea of ‘the constancy hypothesis’ assumes that the world is put in the first place, and the world is seen in its objective and determinate sense. In principle, ‘the constancy hypothesis’ is based on the idea that one forms a point-to-point correspondence between that of perceived and the perceiver. For example, one sees a blue patch against a grey background. The problem arises when one realizes that one does not only see the blue patch on the foreground alone, but that the background is equally attached to the perceived. The points forming the edges of the blue patch and giving a shape to this blue patch equally correspond to the shape of the grey background. Merleau-Ponty's point is that nothing is seen in isolation from its context. This is discussed and illustrated by the Gestalt psychology that claims that our perception is structured and cannot be simply translated by point-to-point perception in its direct relation to a local stimuli.

This can be illustrated by a following example discussed by Merleau-Ponty<sup>48</sup>: One sees two horizontal lines against their background. See figure a). One perceives the lines to be of equal length. This information is constant and consistent with the

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<sup>46</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.30.

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.8.

<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.6.

determinate objects of the objective world. The problem arises when auxiliary lines are added to this figure consisting of two parallel lines. If the auxiliary lines are added as in figure b), the addition of these auxiliary lines re-establishes the seen. It is widely accepted that the result is, that now one does view the objectively equal horizontal lines to appear as unequal, or simply different, according to their length. This perceived information is inconsistent with the fact that one knows that these two lines are of equal length as existing in the objective world. The important point which I want to emphasize here is that the structure of consciousness is discussed by Merleau-Ponty in a close relation to the structure of perception. A conflict in one's perceptual consciousness concerning the reliability of the knowledge gained through the theory 'the constancy hypothesis' is apparent when the meaning of the original figure is redefined by the help of auxiliary lines. One can with the help of attention and judgement explain, that the horizontal lines objectively seen are of equal length, but the problem of perception rises when one sees something else than what one objectively knows.



Figure a)  
Two horizontal lines of equal length.

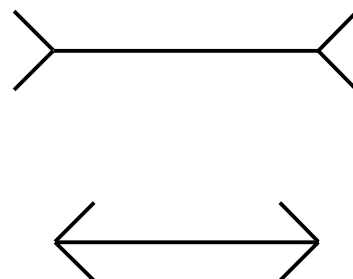


Figure b)  
The Müller-Lyer's optical illusion: Two horizontal lines of equal length with eight auxiliary lines.

The purpose of taking up the discussion of the Müller-Lyer's illusion, is to further emphasize that both of the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism are incapable of answering the distinctive, but peculiar question of how does the perceptual consciousness constitute its objects in its relation to the structure of perception<sup>49</sup>.

## **Chapter 6 - A dialogue with an intellectualist**

### **6.1 Concerning the attention and the judgement**

Thus, Merleau-Ponty describes that empiricism starts with the single impressions, and reasons backwards with the help of attention in order to find answers how to link the single impressions into something meaningful. After a long and detailed dialogue, seeing and discussing the foundations and method of clear and distinct perception, applied by an intellectualist, Merleau-Ponty describes the situation to be the reverse in case of the intellectualist. Merleau-Ponty shows that the intellectualist starts by applying the concept of attention. Merleau-Ponty discusses in detail the example of wax, which is analyzed and give an account by Descartes. According to Merleau-Ponty, the intellectualist takes that if he just carefully enough pays attention, he will discover and be convinced that the wax consists of certain qualities such as hardness and solidity. The wax possesses these primary qualities. Through clear and distinct perception the intellectualist is able to reason and conclude on the qualities of the wax. Further, if heat is applied to this solid and hard piece of wax, it will melt and turn soft and fluid. But still, to an intellectualist, he judges that the wax is still wax, just appearing in another form. Scientifically, the wax is still to be understood as wax. By paying attention and judging the intellectualist can objectively conclude that we still see wax. Well, this creates a problem for Merleau-Ponty. Remember, Merleau-Ponty aims to distinguish between that what we naturally see and what we ought objectively to see. For Merleau-Ponty there is a difference in the appearance of the solid and hard piece of wax and the soft and fluid running wax. They are not the same for our gaze. Our eyes see them as different.

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<sup>49</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 30.

Further, if an intellectualist looks attentively enough at a die, a small cube marked with numbers, laying on a coffee table, straight from above, he will be able to conclude that he sees a geometrical form called a square in the die. Merleau-Ponty's point is that the intellectualist will find the concept of a geometrical form known as a square in the die because his mind already possesses this concept. He will also find a geometrical form known as a circle in the CD Disk for the very same reason that the concept of a circle is already taken to be existing in his thoughts.<sup>50</sup> These concepts just need to be called forward. These concepts are nothing new to an intellectualist, he is equipped by these concepts in advance. According to the principles of the pure intellect and the cogito-argument (I am thinking, therefore I exist) put forward by Descartes, the intellectualist's mind is self-sufficient, all he needs to do is to apply the powers of attention in order to call forth these concepts. Merleau-Ponty describes that the external objects, which the intellectualist sees, become unnecessary for the determinate and all-possessing thought. The mind is complete and absolute, it has everything in its disposal in advance to the person's actual and immediate experience with the exterior world.

In contrast to empiricism, intellectualism ruled out subjectivity and therefore also eliminated the function of sense experience altogether by grounding everything on the foundation of objective, absolute and self-evident thought guided by attention and judgement. According to Merleau-Ponty, the intellectual view is based on a dogmatic idea of a being which possesses itself absolutely, originating from the powers of pure intellect after Descartes.

But, Merleau-Ponty describes that the intellectual and the empirical doctrines have in common, that in both theories the power of attention is taken to be without function.<sup>51</sup> It has become obsolete. Merleau-Ponty has described through his examples how the empirist's single impressions, and the all possessing, self-sufficient and absolute intellectual though, are both independent of this mind based action of applying the powers of attention.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Merleau-Ponty used as example of a plate to illustrate this discussed here. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 31.

<sup>51</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 32.

<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 33.



Now it is time to recall the underlying very big question of this essay. Thus, *what does the situationality, in terms of our bodily existence and our direct bodily contact with the world, have to do with that of having access to something that leads to knowledge about us persons and the exterior world.* Now, we need to look at this question in a slightly saturated perspective of the said and done in this essay, in the new light of the discussion concerning the traditional theories. Recall also the argument from the section 3.3. saying that Merleau-Ponty's aim within his introduction was to discuss in detail how the traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition are flawed in their argumentations concerning the search for knowledge. A one way of expressing this was that the intellectual standpoint is characterized as if one always knows what one is looking for. This was also be expressed by asking, what is the point of looking for something if one already knows in advance what one is looking for. It was stated that if one knows what one is looking for, he should not be searching. Or, on the other hand, the empiricist's failure was stated to be that he misses the point that one needs to know that one is looking for something, otherwise one should not be searching.<sup>53</sup> The major point Merleau-Ponty makes here is that the empiricism is too poor as a doctrine, while the intellectualism is too rich as a doctrine.<sup>54</sup> The empiricist uses the "searchlight"<sup>55</sup> of attention as "a general and unconditioned power in the sense that at any moment it can be applied indifferently to any content of consciousness"<sup>56</sup>. On the other hand, the intellectualist can recall anything from this self-sufficient mind, and the power of attention becomes uninteresting because the mind already prior to the direct experience has a concept of the experienced, and therefore for the rich intellectualist mind, it is not compelling to apply the power of attention to anything.<sup>57</sup> "It [the power of attention] simply has no work to perform."<sup>58</sup> Merleau-Ponty draws an opinion that "[T]he inattentative perception contains nothing more and indeed nothing other than the attentative kind."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 32-33.

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 32.

But according to Merleau-Ponty, there is some very important work to be done by the power of attention. The function of the attention is to create and establish a field to be investigated<sup>60</sup>. This field can be either perceptual or mental. And now, recall again the underlying principle question of this essay, in its modified version that we persons are to be searching for access to knowledge. And an important part of this access is found and established in form of this initial field created by the power of attention. And from here the process of development and learning are to be taking place. The very problem and defect of the traditional theories of empiricism and the intellectualism in the Cartesian tradition is that they give no room for the act of learning<sup>61</sup>.

Merleau-Ponty wishes to return to that of searching for the knowledge. His phenomenological way of thinking encourages us persons to be curious about our environments and surroundings, and the directly experienced situations in which we find ourselves, in our ordinary lives. The purpose of his phenomenology is to help us to see and therefore also to rediscover our ordinary lived life at new.<sup>62</sup> And at this point we can return to the second major problem faced by the intellectualist when it comes to that what we see, as contrasted with, what we ought to see. Lets return to the example of the wax as originally discussed by Descartes and then followed up by Merleau-Ponty. Remember, I already pointed out a moment ago that the material is to be intellectually understood as something called wax, although it can take and appear in different forms such as being solid and hard one moment, and a moment later appear as soft and fluid. Still, rationally and intellectually understood, we are talking and referring so a material called wax. Despite of these different appearances we use a logical activity of judging and we reason and conclude that the material under the investigation is wax, despite of its new form caused by the added heat. - But now, that of judging is based on a logical activity. Remember, there is a difference between that of logically judging and describing. With the other words, what we ought to see is not the same as what we see. - Scientifically and objectively there is nothing wrong in this conclusion. It is very useful in the sphere of the science. The solid and hard wax is not the same in its appearance as the soft and fluid wax. There is a difference in their composition. And this is what causes problems between the intellectually applied

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<sup>60</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 57.

judgement and what we actually see without aiming to see what we ought to see objectively.

This has a parallel to that of describing us persons. Further short comings arise when the scientific knowledge is to be applied to that to cover that of being a person. The problem is that the scientific doctrines are not enough to cover all the aspects of that of being a person and for example seeing something else than what we objectively ought to see. In Merleau-Ponty's own words the problem of intellectualism is expressed by saying that, in the sciences, which have such a domination role in the sphere of true knowledge, "perception is the 'flaw' in this 'great diamond' [of intellectualism]"<sup>63</sup>.

Now, let's take up "the act of learning"<sup>64</sup> once again. Think about a child who sees an object which she is not able to describe by the concept assigned to that object, in terms of the corresponding definition commonly used and accepted in the spoken language and further found in the established dictionaries. A scientist who daily works with this very same object, which a child sees but cannot find a proper concept for, has learned what this object is called and can tell us that the object is known as "a cathode ray tube"<sup>65</sup>. Although the child does not have a concept of the seen, she sees something, an object in its context. The child does not yet have a mental concept of the seen in terms of the language, but she will eventually hear it when someone tells her the name of that object. The child will learn what the object is called, and how it is used and by whom, and for what purpose. The child is developing her scope of knowledge. And here we are talking about the structure of our consciousness! The structure of our consciousness is not to be taken as something static and complete to start with, - neither will it ever reach a God-like standard of all-knowing and infinite knowledge. Although the child does not know the proper name assigned to the object, she sees, it does not wipe away the fact that she sees something. Thus, the content of what the child sees is not empty or without meaning. The meaning changes and is rearranged when the child learns more. The structure of our consciousness changes and develops when we become conscious of the new concepts and practical

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<sup>63</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 241.

<sup>64</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 31.

<sup>65</sup> Crane, "The nonconceptual content of experience", p. 136. My example is based on the example given by Crane in his essay.

tasks of the life. Merleau-Ponty himself gives an example of a child who during his first nine months after the birth becomes aware of the colors.<sup>66</sup> The child's structure of the consciousness has changed during this time, and now the structure of the child's consciousness includes that of recognizing a variety of colors. "A new dimension of an experience"<sup>67</sup> has opened up to a child. Thus, the structure of our consciousness has a potential for development. This is what I mean by the transitoriness introduced in the introduction of my essay. Naturally, this has its root in the writings of Merleau-Ponty. After this has been said, I would like to round up this Part 2 on the historical developments with the following long quotation from Merleau-Ponty:

"To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as figures. They are performed only as horizons, they constitute in reality new regions in the total world. It is precisely the original structure which they introduce that brings out the identity of the object before and after the act of attention. Once the color-quality is acquired, and only by means of it, do the previous data appear as preparations of this quality. Once the idea of an equation has been acquired, equal arithmetical quantities appear as varieties of the same equation. It is precisely by overthrowing data that the act of attention is related to previous acts, and the unity of consciousness is thus built up step by step through a 'transition-synthesis'. The miracle of consciousness consists in its bringing to light, through attention, phenomena which re-establish the unity of the object in a new dimension at the very moment when they destroy it. Thus attention is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon. At the same time as it sets attention in motion, the object is at every moment recaptured and placed once more in a state of dependence on it. It gives rise to the 'knowledge-bringing event' which is to transform it, only by means of the still ambiguous meaning which it requires that event to clarify; it is therefore the motive and not the cause of the event. But at least the act of attention is rooted in the life of consciousness, and one can finally understand how it emerges from its liberty of indifference and gives itself a present object. This passage from the indeterminate to the determinate, this recasting at every moment of its own history in the unity of a new meaning, is thought itself. 'The work of mind exists only in act.' The result of the act of attention is not to be found in its beginning."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 34-35.

<sup>67</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 35.

<sup>68</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 35-36.

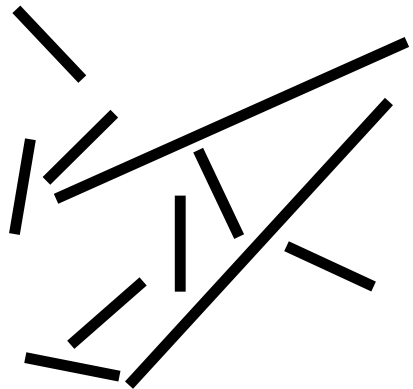
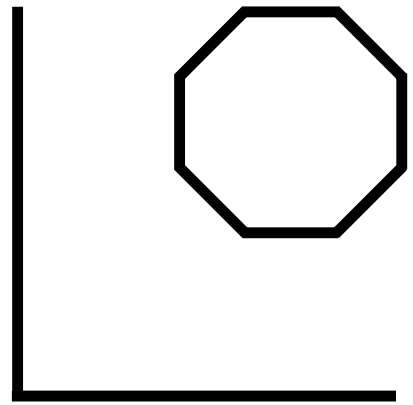
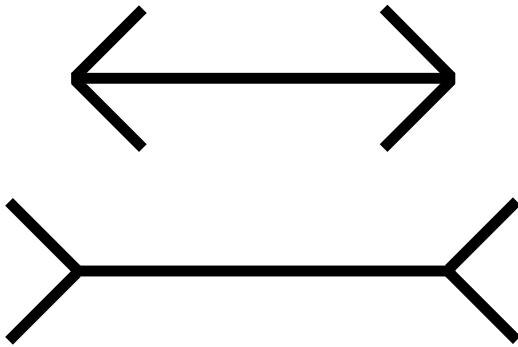
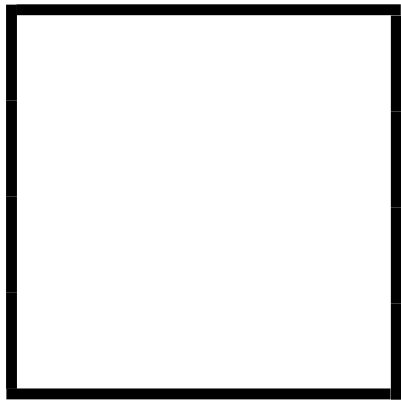
## **PART 3 – COMPROMISING THE CASE**

## **PART 3 – COMPROMISING THE CASE**

### **Chapter 7 - Towards Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal field**

#### **7.1 About the issues of the structure of the perceptual consciousness and the structure of the perceived.**

Now, please take a look of the six compositions on the next page before reading any further.



This example of compositions on the previous page is of my own, inspired by the writings of Merleau-Ponty. The reason for supplying this example is to provide it as a transition to the discussion concerning the structure of meaning as linked both to the structure of consciousness of us perceivers and to the structure of the compositions (that of perceived). Another way of expressing this is to say that this is to be linking together us persons and the world in which we live.

My own example on the previous page is put forward in order to illustrate Merleau-Ponty's point about that of the structure and the meaning, and how the structure and meaning are inseparable when taking perception as a source of knowledge. All of these six examples are composed of exactly the same principle elements of 2 long lines and of eight shorter lines. Merleau-Ponty would say about my example that the meaning of each composition, of the seen, will depend how the lines are organized. With the other words, the meaning will depend on the composition of the lines and what is the relation of these lines to each other. Look at the example one and the given ten lines forming a certain type of a composition. Look at the example two, the given ten lines forming another certain kind of a composition. Look at the third example, again, the given ten lines forming a third kind of a composition. And so on until the last of these compositions, the example number six. The point of this is that all of these compositions are linked to that of having a certain meaning.

Now, recall the example of wax from the previous Part 2, on discussion concerning the intellectualism in relation to the power of attention and the logical activity of judging. - The ten lines in my example remain as individual elements understood analytically, just as Descartes concludes and claims that the wax remains in his example, although through one's senses one can smell a different smell depending on if the wax is in its solid or melted form, see different shapes corresponding with solidity and fluidity, feel the softness of the wax which a moment earlier was felt as a hard, solid piece of wax a moments before the heat was applied to it. Merleau-Ponty's point is that the composition of both Descartes' and my examples, as viewed in terms of the sense-based perception, has changed. And the point of this is that there is a certain value, certain clue towards how a knowledge is searched and gained.

As analytically understood, the lines (2 long lines and 8 short lines) are repeated in all compositions. This means that the lines are alike in all of these compositions if



understood as individual objects by themselves. Thus, the lines are still lines, but, - now, please stay alert and pay attention -, the meaning that they carry varies from composition to composition, and depends on the composition they are linked to. The meaning when taken this way, cannot be separated from the figure.

In all of these compositions concerning my lines, each composition has got a new meaning based on the rearrangement of the individual elements which still intellectually are understood as they were originally. Individually understood the elements of these compositions are just lines. I could say that ‘the same old individual elements’ are repeated in each composition. The above applies also for Descartes’ wax. The point here is that the meaning perceived is based on the very composition it represents. The meaning is inseparable from the structure of its composition. This acknowledgement is of great value, which carries a meaning and has a role in that how one searches and eventually gains knowledge through senses, thus through one’s bodily anchored situationality in the world, simply via the initial personal experience.

Now, recall the discussion concerning the Modern paintings. Also, recall the discussion on Müller-Lyer’s optical illusion. And remember the issue of “error”. - It is of interest in this essay to discuss the differences and similarities between that of veridical knowledge and the knowledge provided by perceiving illusions. I would like to ask, if it is possible to claim that an illusion is not misleading the one who perceives? In a case where the illusion itself has a structure and meaning that misleads us in our relation to the objective world, the illusion is thought to be genuine by Merleau-Ponty, when “this [the] meaning originates in the source of sensation and nowhere else”<sup>69</sup>. This case needs to be studied further since it implies that the illusion carries some information and knowledge that is of essence for us, concerning the structure of illusion as well as the structure of our perceptual consciousness, in its capability of sincerely misleading us. - What we see is what we see. What we see is not an “error”, it is just simply what we see. We see a “truth” in its own context.

Well, after this has been said, I would like ask following questions: Can we picture any certainty in uncertainty? Could you accept the thought that the optical illusions, - both on paper and in the real world -, which we from time to time experience, are to be taken as sources of significant knowledge? - These questions

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<sup>69</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 24.

might sound very self-contradicting, but as a matter of fact, Merleau-Ponty aims to show that there is to be found something primary in that of uncertain. According to him, the optical illusions are to be taken seriously because by studying the optical illusions we can have access to, as well as we can learn, something very important about the structure of our perceptual consciousness and the structure of perceived.

Now, I would like to ask the following: Under what conditions can it be justified for a claim that an illusion is authentically deceiving us, and that this truth of the given illusion implies that the structure of the illusion carries a meaning that is of essence? When we see something else than what we ought to see in a relation to the objective world and when the seen illusion cannot be explained by anything else than by its original meaning structure. This leads us to discover a true illusion that illustrates the difference between that of what we see and what we ought to see. With the other words, there is a difference between the objective world and the world of which we are apart of, and the world in which we exists and constantly perceive something. This structure of the perceived also influences the structure of our consciousness. The structure of our consciousness changes over time and develops and becomes something else. Remember, there is a learning process, to which neither empiricism or intellectualism give place. The process of developing and learning from something unclear and indeterminate is ignored by both empiricism and intellectualism. It is important to give space for that of being ignorant in order to be able to find knowledge and to be able to learn. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no room for ignorance within the traditional intellectualism. An illusion is analyzed and solved by the intellectualism in the terms of the objective world based on the guiding rule of clear and distinct perception as an operation of the mind. The analytical perception is capable of reducing the seen into that what we ought to see, but the analytical method cannot make us to see what we ought to see, nor can it understand what we see although the analytical method is capable of constructing the illusion. The clue here is not to construct the illusion. The clue is to see what kind of information and of authentic value does it carry in the relation to the foundation for our knowledge, about the world and about ourselves. For example, a situation which is difficult to be grasped by the analytical perception, is that of a symmetrical square placed right in the middle of a rectangle piece of paper.<sup>70</sup> If one turns the sheet of

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<sup>70</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 54.

paper, say 180 degrees around, by one's analytical perception one will understand that the paper is turned around, and that one now is perceiving the square up side down, but one's perception would not recognize the difference if one didn't see the paper to be turned. There is no difference in the structure of the seen when the piece of paper is in its original position or if it is turned 180 degrees around. One's perception is not aware of this change. But one is able to understand analytically that there is a change of position if the paper is the right way up, or if the paper is turned 180 degrees. Putting this with other words is that there is a difference between that of visually perceiving something, and that of understanding, and that that of visually perceiving something is not the same as understanding "that same", (because they are not the same). One of Merleau-Ponty's main claims is that the structure of the perceived is not separable from its meaning.

To see what we see is to act in accordance with the perceptual arrangement of things or elements within the phenomenal field in which the constructional relationships are inseparable from the meaning that this cluster of data has a meaning as "a perceptual syntax"<sup>71</sup>, i.e. that the cluster of data has a meaning as it is presented within its constructional relationships instead that each element has a meaning prior to this. To this Merleau-Ponty refers as to rearrangement of the meaning. The important issue here is the constructional relationships of that of seen. To see "naturally" is to act in accordance with the perceptual structure. The objects we are familiar with, and which we know prior seeing them in a certain, specific perceptual context (perceptual field) are rearranged within their perceptual context. The meaning of the elements is not seen independently from their perceptual context, perceptual field. The meaning of the perceived is like a package, it comes in a package, -you have it all at once. The meaning of the seen is the sum of all the elements within the perceptual field. The individual elements understood by themselves can have a very different meaning when seen in isolation from the rest of the particular composition in question. But the point here is not to understand each element objectively as they are by themselves. We can analyze and explain each object, but this analytical perception is not of interest here. The interesting question is what do we see, instead of analyzing what we ought to see.

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<sup>71</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 42.

The judgemental error made in form of a false judgement while a cluster of data is opened up in front of one's eyes as a perceptual "syntax" is not an error in its deeper sense, and that of applying the act of attention to a something initially unclear and indeterminate and starting to recapture the seen which was absorbed in one single stroke by the perceiver is a beginning of true 'knowledge-bringing event' taking place in the life of consciousness.<sup>72</sup>

Merleau-Ponty has paved the way and "opened up a *phenomenal field*"<sup>73</sup> as a new dimension, which is also his starting point for re-discovering an old phenomenon of sense experience and thereafter describing his theory of (visual) perception. "Meaning is inseparable from the figure. This causes the problem of perception to reappear. "We construct the illusion, but we do not understand it."<sup>74</sup> This is where the perceptual field starts playing an essential role." And the illusions are to be taken as valuable sources of information about the nature of our bodily existence, about the nature of us persons.

## Chapter 8 - Conclusion

One way of understanding my approach, and Merleau-Ponty's approach has been like having the question in the middle, and then seeing and pondering over the question from all different angles. The view has never from nowhere or from above from a God-like absolute and universal position from all perspectives simultaneously. The view has been, and is, always from somewhere.<sup>75</sup> Our views are always given by our temporal bodily anchoring in the situations. Now, I take that the question under the investigation has been viewed, discussed, and circled around to some degree and the time has come to conclude and round up this essay.

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<sup>72</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 35-37.

<sup>73</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 62.

<sup>74</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty A Guide for the Perplexed*, p.93.

### **8.1 Discussing the sphere of the Contemporary site-specific and situational visual artworks in the context of this essay**

I will conclude by discussing the sphere of Contemporary site-specific and situational visual artworks in the context of the said and done in this essay.

Merleau-Ponty has said that we are to be returning to the ‘primitive’ life, to the pre-objective, to the pre-reflective, to the pre-theorizing, we are to just simply describe our everyday engagement here on the earth, in our daily surroundings and chores. We simply need to learn to relook the world. “‘True philosophy’”<sup>76</sup>, says Merleau-Ponty, ‘consists in relearning to look at the world’”<sup>77</sup>. For Merleau-Ponty, this true philosophy is his phenomenology. According to Merleau-Ponty, science has made the world to be a comfortable place, but now it is the time to train ourselves to see the ambiguity and the strange existence of the world. Merleau-Ponty compares this relearning to art: “like art, it does not simply represent a pre-existing truth, but forces us to see the world differently, and in that sense creates a new truth.”<sup>78</sup> This is a way of returning to see how the things really are, returning to things in themselves through a direct experience.<sup>79</sup> - Let me explain why I agree with the above. First of all, I take that that of looking at the works of visual arts, which are puzzling to us, start asking us question exactly for the reason that we are puzzled by them. And I see the genius in the artworks which show us our everyday life in a fresh context. Or vise versa, when our everyday context is shown to have a new content. Visual arts triggers us to ask questions we would not even consider asking otherwise. Thus, without these strange settings revealed to us with the help of arts, certain questions would not even exists to us. With the help of the visual arts, we can question about even the most obvious, about the things we take for given. We can question about a table, a chair, an apple, and what are their relations to each other. Visual arts set our habitual everyday life, meaning and relations, in different light. Arts do not need to act according to the rational and scientific laws and rules. The arts make our world uncomfortable at the times. They make us to loose our solid grip under our feet. This freshens up our customized, often forgotten wonder towards the world in which we live.

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<sup>76</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xxiii.

<sup>77</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty A Guide for the Perplexed*, p.16.

<sup>78</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty A Guide for the Perplexed*, p.17.

<sup>79</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty A Guide for the Perplexed*, p.138.

The art works and the persons are to be seen parallel and as similar. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, a person is to be compared to a work of Modern art. According to Merleau-Ponty, only through our bodily existence we can have access to truth. That through body we have access to these pre-objective situations over which we are to reflect in order to arrive to knowledge. Thus, we need to understand us persons, in order to understand how to have access to knowledge. Merleau-Ponty communicates through his written words that:

“[T]he body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art. In a picture or a piece of music the idea is incommunicable by means other than the display of colors and sounds. ... A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the things expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal and spatial situation. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms”<sup>80</sup>.

Let's take one more step back to the previous chapters. Thus, obviously knowledge has been an issue for Merleau-Ponty since he had taken up the criticism on the traditional theories. But what was actually the problem here? - Well, the objective, scientific truth and certain knowledge has been discussed and updated through out the times. This is fine for Merleau-Ponty. There is in one way nothing wrong in that of aiming to see the things objectively, it is just one kind of knowledge. But the problem for Merleau-Ponty rises when an individual, the one who observes, is taken categorically as any object of this world. This is not what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when taking up his phenomenology as a certain kind of anti-dogmatism. The traditional theories of empiricism and intellectualism are examples of dogmatism for Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty aims to get behind, deeper into the origins of the human existence in order to say how we can have access to knowledge. This he aims to achieve by describing how a person exists and lives in the everyday world. In this context the question of *what do we see* has been of great help in order to grasp what Merleau-Ponty means by this. Merleau-Ponty's interest has not been in a

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<sup>80</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 174.

*transcendental*<sup>81</sup> subject in a sense of being objectified and standing outside of a given situation. His interest is in a *situated*<sup>82</sup> subject where the subject has a particular view point from where he perceives. It is in this contextuality of situated, and non-transcendental where the Contemporary site-specific and situational artworks will be taken into discussion. Here, I will quote Matthews' words concerning Merleau-Ponty's interest in the Modern painting:

“The relation between the various objects and planes depicted in a modern painting is a relation in which they stand to a subject, the painter or the person viewing the painting, not some kind of a impersonal relationship to a point in the world, such as a human retina or the film in the back of the camera. The painter is trying to reveal a truth about the world as he or she lives it, a world experienced as meaningful for him or her. This truth is revealed by constructing on canvas a world which embodies those meanings. The subject does not merely represent objective truth: subject and object are inseparably intertwined.”<sup>83</sup>

But here I agree with the first part of Matthews' claim, but I do not agree that the viewer who is not the painter himself, is standing in some kind of a personal relationship to the art work. I claim that the artwork is still impersonal to the viewer, there is a distance between the art works and the viewer. The Modern art is still viewed, when taking the standpoint other than that of the artist, as objectified, and not as a direct subject-object relationship as it was desired by Merleau-Ponty. In Modern art there still was the subject-object differentiation and division, as well as a barrier between the observer and the work of art, despite of that the barrier was deleted between the artist and his creation.

It has been claimed that Merleau-Ponty did not solve the problem of not ending up scientifically reflecting over the direct sense experience. There is a difference between that of experiencing something directly and describing it. Describing is not the same as experiencing something. The direct sense experience is an immediate experience between the perceiver and the world, while describing the direct sense experience rather belongs to the sphere of the theorizing and reflecting over the direct sense experience.

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<sup>81</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A guide for the Perplexed*, p. 34.

<sup>82</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A guide for the Perplexed*, p. 34.

<sup>83</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A guide for the Perplexed*, p. 138.

- That of bringing in the Modern Arts was Merleau-Ponty's contribution. My contribution was to go even step further, along Matthews' acknowledgement in the context of the prevailing times we are living in, and to bring in the Contemporary site specific and situational artworks. I take this to link Merleau-Ponty's work to a actual philosophical debate of today. As a historical fact of Merleau-Ponty's time, the contemporary site-specific, situational art works were still long ahead of his time, and all what was available to him was the then prevailing works of Modern art. I believe that in the present context of the Contemporary site-specific and situational visual artworks the time is mature to discuss the interwoven play of the subjective sphere and the objective sphere. All five senses are activated as is the intellectual action of reflecting. As I already mentioned, the traditional subject-object relation was still too strongly present and dominant in the Modern artworks. And this was exactly what Merleau-Ponty was to eliminate, the clear distinction between the subjective and the objective positions. This is, of course, a very primitive and superficial way of putting this question. The underlying idea was that the subjective experience is immediate and personal while the objective position involves that of stepping a side from one's current subjective position. So the question, or the problem becomes, how to intertwine more completely these two very different positions. By definition, that of taking an objective position involves that of reflecting over and also describing something, for example that what we see. That of seeing something and experiencing that of seeing is not the same as describing what we see. Characteristically these situations are distinct. So how to shift our position to be something different than our everyday positions without loosing contact with the subjective sphere while stepping on the side? That is what the question becomes to. - My solution to this is by taking in the Contemporary works of arts. The Contemporary art works provide this condition, or situationality through our bodily awareness which is necessary, in order to still be in-oneself subjectively through the sense experiences, while at the same time being provided a new perspective of seeing an everyday situation such as cooking a dinner and eating in a social setting together with others<sup>84</sup>, seeing a table, or a chair. And therefore, also providing a situation, an environment where one can simultaneously have contact with the basic sense experience such as seeing as well as reflecting over the given situation of the changed perspective and therefore at the same time being in-

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<sup>84</sup> Here I refer to the artworks done by Rirkrit Tiravanija (born 1961).



oneself, and being a part, taking a step on the side from one's everyday sensed life experiences. In the Contemporary art works the subject-object relation is wiped away in a simple act that one literally walks into a work of art. One does not stay at the distance and stare the artwork. One has become an integrated part of the artwork, where one's actions play an active role. The big underlying message is that the meaning of that of being a person, and living a life is inseparable from the actions we both are involved with and are taking. The "beauty" and "genius" of the Contemporary site-specific and situational artworks lays in that of involving us. And in that that the everyday objects and situations are given a new arrangement and therefore a meaning through their use. The objects are altered and therefore the situations are altered too, or vice versa. Their expected functions are not there as expected habitually. We understand conceptually what the objects are, but we cannot use them as we expect. Maybe a chair is too small, or too large, or maybe the chair is consisting just of beams of light rays cast in the air. Maybe we can still use the chair, but the chair does not function as we would expect in a relation to our bodies. There is a mismatch between our conceptual and habitual understanding of the objects and the situations and therefore also we person also see ourselves in a new light. This is the true way of removing the distance between the objective and the subjective spheres. One is simultaneously in both spheres while in the Contemporary site-specific and situational artworks. And Merleau-Ponty was after to remove the distance between that of the theorist and how he threats perception. Merleau-Ponty hoped that in his phenomenological approach, the distance between himself and that how he threats the perception would be "vanished". This was the intention of his actions, but in the reality he did not quite achieve his goal, the merged situation. But he did achieve to show that the meaning is inseparable from its context, and this by itself is a great achievement, which again has paved the way to the further discoveries and new knowledge. Such as that of claiming that the Contemporary arts are one way of proposing the solution to Merleau-Ponty's question. Arts provide one way of rearranging the familiar everyday objects and situations, environments. The arrangements and the composition is new, and this also leads to a new meaning for us to ponder over. Maybe the meaning is strange, unclear, undetermined at the moment of its expose, but anyhow, it is there, and it is to be reflected over. And maybe eventually it leads to something fresh and new, clear and determinate. That of

uncertainty is an valuable aspect of our lives, as is that of certainty. A new perceptual field has opened up in front of our eyes.

But why was the Modern painting so important to Merleau-Ponty in that of revealing something fresh about our everyday life? - Because, according to Merleau-Ponty, the Modern painting both offers and exposes us something that we have no clear idea what it could be. In certain cases we don't have a slightest idea what we are looking at. And that what we have "left" with, is only the action, that is what we experience in its purest form. We as adults are returned to the level which a child experiences and faces when she looks at a "cathode ray tube"<sup>85</sup>. - Recall the discussed on learning from the previous chapters. Child sees something without yet having a concept of it. And it is here that we have returned to the things-in-themselves how they really are, and therefore also we have returned to the true perception! This is of the greatest essence to Merleau-Ponty. We have returned to a situation to which we are bodily awareness, through bodily awareness where the action of learning surfaces.

The aim is to learn to see the world as we look at the arts, and to rediscover and to learn to appreciate the world as strange and unclear, and indeterminate. By this way we can through perception return to things themselves how they really are.

As the final concluding remark, I will return to the very beginning of this essay, and to my belief that we persons are always fasten upon our situationality, and that physically we persons can never leave our present situationality in the world, while our thoughts can travel along the time line of past, present and future. - Based on the said and done in this essay, I believe that it should be acknowledged that the mind can, and should travel to the memories and the history, stay at the present, and direct its thoughts towards the future and the coming, while we persons inhabiting our bodies will always stay physically situated in this world, at any given time. I don't see any conflict in this set up. My whole body is mine, and composed of me.<sup>86</sup> I live and think in and from my body. I use my body.<sup>87</sup> "I am my body."<sup>88</sup> My multiple actions,

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<sup>85</sup> Crane, *"The nonconceptual content of experience"*, p.136

<sup>86</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A guide for the Perplexed*, p. 51.

<sup>87</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A guide for the Perplexed*, p. 42.

<sup>88</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A guide for the Perplexed*, p. 51.

taking place simultaneously, such as concluding this essay by typing these words<sup>89</sup>, and thinking what to say, are taken through my body. Typing takes place through my fingers pressing the keys, one after another, on my Apple PowerBook. That of thinking is recognizable through my half loud spoken words spoken to myself. The aspects of the bodily awareness and the thinking mind form together in a unity the primary of us persons. These aspects are different, and they are not to be equal, while brought together in an intertwined position. The “beauty” of these spheres is that they are different from each other while they compliment each other and build a larger whole together. They will always exist together and be understood in the context of each other, anchored and seen and recognized here in our daily world.

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<sup>89</sup> Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty, A guide for the Perplexed*, p. 42. Similar example of typing is given by Matthews, where he makes the point that *my* body is *mine*, and nobody else's. Thus, the subjective experience is *mine*, through *my* body.

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(All together 837 pages)